

Freedom, Funding, Fearlessness

A Vision for South West Towns

fsb⁰⁸

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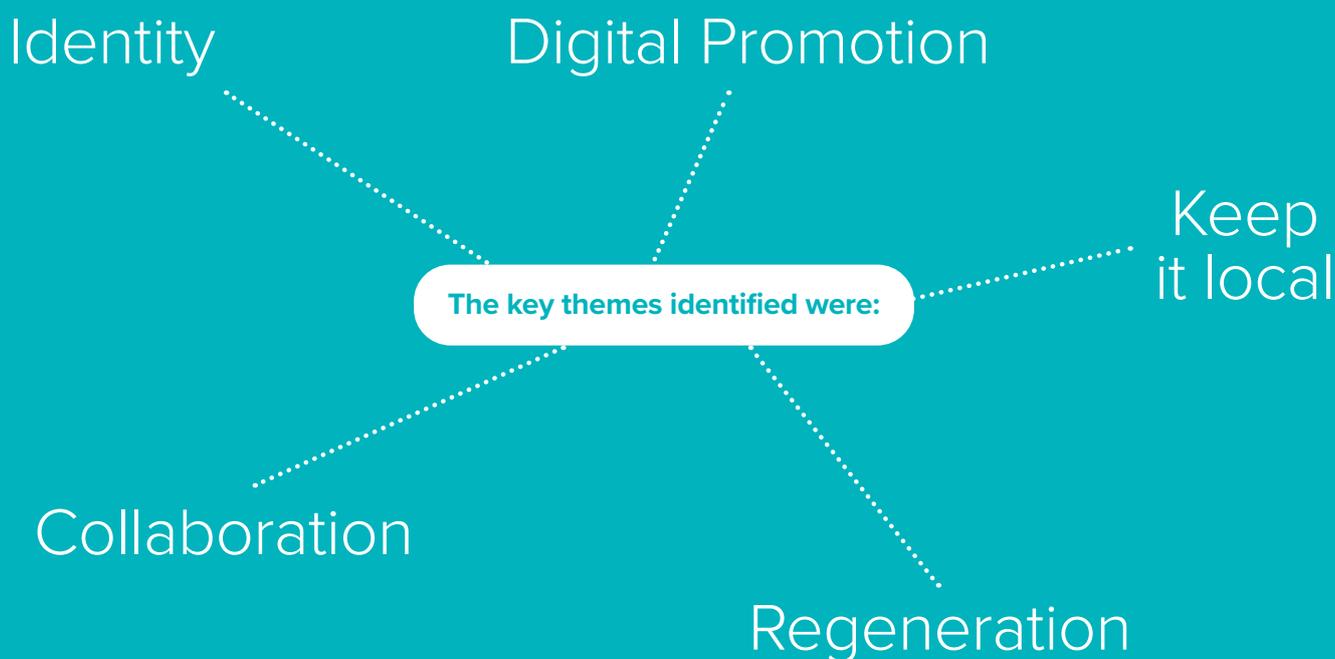
1.0 Executive summary

Towns and the businesses within them are the heart of communities across the country. There have been several reports commissioned over the last few years¹ and each calls for more to be done to understand the nature of small businesses' contributions to their towns. The UK Government's vision is one of better-connected communities, more neighbourliness, and businesses of all sizes to strengthen society.² This report demonstrates the extent to which South West towns are embracing this vision at a local level.

The challenges faced by towns differ from those faced by cities, especially in terms of investment. Towns often miss out on central government funding and therefore develop a range of local initiatives. By looking across the South West, we can learn from what has been working well and use that best practice to enable success in more of our local towns.

The FSB brief for this report was to explore initiatives taking place around the region, looking at what South West towns were like both pre and during the pandemic and to note examples of what has been successful.

The report draws on insights from FSB members from around the region. Qualitative data from interviews with staff and stakeholders contributed to the case study approach involving many of the South West towns.



¹ www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/streets-ahead.html
www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/small-business-big-heart-communities-report.html
www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/new-horizons.html

² www.fsb.org.uk/campaign/high-street-hub.html

Each theme was visible in all the towns analysed but through a range of diverse projects, and the initiatives can be adapted by any town as appropriate. When analysing the data further, we see that each theme builds on another and provides an outcome greater than the sum of its parts.

Findings show how these towns are forging ahead, discovering new ways of attracting people and generating strong, local economies that will thrive and grow in the years to come. The final part of the report focuses on recommendations suggesting how other towns can use this report and how stakeholders can support initiatives in their own areas.

Our call to action for South West Towns is for stakeholders to come together and for everyone to get behind a shared vision appropriate for their individual town.



2.0 Introduction

This report was commissioned by FSB in 2021 following work across the South West which had identified initiatives which appeared to engender successful towns. Despite being finalised in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we found that many of these projects were relevant both pre and post the pandemic.

FSB became aware that many South West towns were not in a destructive mind-set believing that the high street was dead, but continued to forge ahead, discovering new ways of attracting people and in the process, generating strong, local economies that will thrive and grow in the years to come.

The aim of this report is to provide a discussion document to showcase innovation and ideas. The objectives are to analyse the excellent and diverse range of initiatives being implemented across South West towns and to show how these might be adopted in other places around the region.

The report will provide an informed discussion document for stakeholders who wish to work with their towns to take them in a new direction. It allows for town centres to come together, showcasing what is good and celebrating success in a challenging time. Above all, it highlights a range of initiatives that are working well and making a difference to local people and livelihoods.

3.0 Background

"FSB gives a voice to small businesses and our members tell us they are more successful when they are based in vibrant thriving towns. Our hope is that by drawing out some key themes that appear to engender success in a location this will spark conversations and new initiatives which will not only revitalise towns but also provide new opportunities for those small businesses based within them."

Lee Nathan

FSB Chair for the South West

Federation of Small Businesses

The pandemic has brought profound challenges to the way we live and work and has placed businesses under massive pressure.

The big revelation of the pandemic has been how effectively many people can work from home. As the virus struck, businesses developed their agility at transferring activity to workers' homes.³ This contributed to the accelerated adoption of online shopping, with consumers more likely to purchase household goods online than in a store. It has also made working from home acceptable and online gatherings rather than meeting in person the new norm, freeing endless hours of business travel and expense for better use.

It is becoming increasingly clear that people are unlikely to return to the old ways of doing things. Fewer people coming into towns to work and shop leaves space in areas that were once characterised by bustling shops and offices. The places most at risk are those that have little else to attract locals and visitors from further afield. As people travel less for work or to shop, town centres will need alternative offerings to fill vacant space and to attract people to the area. Post-Covid we are unlikely to see a return to old commuting habits, with a significant proportion of those able to work from home doing so for at least part of the week⁴.

At the same time, the sudden turn to digital (e.g., online shopping, socialising through video conferencing and so forth) may well aid the renewal of town centres – as people hanker to dwell in shared physical spaces. How we use these spaces, and how and when we dwell are likely to change and to keep changing. As we move forward these are the challenges facing our town centres.

³ The future of towns and cities post COVID-19 (KPMG, 2021)

⁴ www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GrimseyReview2.pdf

4.0 South West Towns – What is going well?

"We are witnessing a resourcefulness to refocus and reinvent at all levels – business, town and cross region. Innovative repurposing of public arenas into greener, healthier and more connected spaces are being mapped out. Designs for new social hubs that embrace the interplay between residents, businesses and visitors realised. Multi-million-pound investments in place and people, united behind a purpose. This is about tapping into new ways of thinking, working, living and doing things – pioneering circular local economies that all can engage in, benefit from and ultimately enjoy. Harnessing the South West's 'community capital' to help shape the future of each local high street. And, by doing so, create a trailblazing blueprint for the rest of the UK to follow."

Richard Wilcox

Chair of South West BIDs

The South West is one of nine official regions of England and consists of the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. It is geographically the largest of the nine regions of England covering 9,200 square miles (23,800 km²), but the third-least populated, with approximately five million residents⁵.

The report focuses on a number of towns from around the region. These towns typically miss out on high levels of central government funding so have responded by developing their own ways to attract people and businesses.

These towns were identified by FSB representatives as examples which stood out within their area; as having a creative approach to promoting their town and attracting people to it. Through meetings held with local business leaders, business groups, district and town councils, volunteer groups and wider stakeholders, primary data was collected. During the analysis key themes emerged and are discussed below.

⁵ www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/censusoutputareaestimatesinthesouthwestregionofengland



Key themes



Identity



Collaboration



Digital Promotion



Keep it Local



Regeneration



Identity

Context

Our research found that post Covid-19 small businesses are coming together to help engage with their local community in order to enliven their space and attract people to their town. As part of this, the identity of the town is key, becoming something that businesses can gravitate around. This is supported by the findings of 'The Future of Welsh Towns report'⁶ which highlighted the need for towns to develop a unique selling point (USP) to be successful pre-pandemic but are equally relevant today.

In our research, many of the towns in the study are designated as 'market towns', with the markets playing a central role and giving it a USP. It is this underlying identity which shows through in the initiatives. This theme builds on Theme 4: Keeping it local with the markets representing a source of identity, collaboration, and local shopping. They are an integral part of what attracts people to these towns.

"The market has become a destination, a meeting place for local people and a platform for other events as they have a village green style space in the centre during the market, with music and food, plus in the summer, sand, deckchairs and donkeys."

Interview with Peter Wheelhouse and Vivienne Whitaker,

Frome Town Council on 22.01.21

South West initiatives:

Three markets are showcased below together with an arts festival. Each one showing the unique selling point of the town.

Frome's independent market is a flagship project growing from a monthly flea market to "Frome Independent" in 2013.

- The largest street market in the South West.
- An average of 8-10,000 people coming into the town for each market (pre-Covid).
- Supported initially with capital from the district and town councils.
- Now independently run as a Community Interest Company (CIC) contributing c£2million p.a. to the local economy.

⁶ www.fsb.org.uk/resources-page/fsb-wales---the-future-of-welsh-towns-.html

- It has a 'suitcase sale' section for very small retailers who are just getting started, allowing them to sell a small number of products from suitcases.
- A key driver in helping independent traders get started, and in allowing others to progress to permanent units in the town.
- Themed each month with different events to match, allowing for ringing the changes with stalls, and the opportunity to try out new ideas.
- The organisers run training and workshops for traders.
- Helped to make the town an independent shopping destination.

Tavistock's Ancient Pannier Market is also central to the identity of the town.

- Open every day from Tuesday until Saturday.
- Prides itself on the eclectic range it has to offer including photographers, potters, artists, upholsterers, quilters, card makers, wood turners, and metal workers who mingle with clothiers, milliners, antiques experts and furniture-makers.
- Includes five-day traders, (who are always present in the market), selling a diverse mix of products and services ranging from antiquarian and second-hand books, pet food, watch batteries and repairs, engraved gifts, delicious cakes and sweets to DIY tools and sundries, fashion jewellery and garden plants.
- Additionally, there are traders who change throughout the week to reflect the different daily themes, for example, Tuesday's Market includes craft, antiques and collectables, whereas Wednesday and Thursday include a varied range of goods and crafted wares.

Finally, **Wimborne Market**

- Combines locally sourced food in award winning restaurants, alfresco dining, and pubs.
- Offers regular food festivals and farmers markets forming an important part of the local events calendar.

"With the UK high streets changing, Wimborne with its varied local independent businesses and excellent markets provides a beautiful destination for its visitors. We have a weekly, Friday market at the Allendale Centre and a monthly farmers' market in town. Both these markets pull in important footfall from outside of the area and once people arrive, their enjoyment of the unique experience of visiting our historical town, encourages them to return time and time again."

Susan Turner,
Wimborne BID Director

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- The market has grown to become one of the largest open air and covered markets in the south of England.
 - Similar to Frome and Tavistock, Wimborne has a variety of markets i.e., the Friday market includes both open air and indoor market stalls and the weekly farmers market combined with a large antiques bazaar, attracting traders and buyers from all over the country.

However, it is not just markets that provide identity. Creative and artistic events can also bring a town together around a common theme. **Weston-super-Mare's Whirligig Festival**, for example, takes place over a weekend in September and is part of a larger series of events which culminate to make England's largest heritage festival.

- Free event, presented by community arts group Theatre Orchard.
- Winner of the Best UK Small Event in the National Outdoor Events Association Awards 2019.
- Showcases both local and internationally recognised talent from circus, puppetry, music, dance and theatre with events held at various locations across the town.

*"Whirligig is back to take over the town centre with experiences that will amaze, move and uplift."*⁷

Fiona Matthews,

Creative Director at Theatre Orchard

In summary, our findings show identity as one of the most of important of the themes. The identity is something that relates to the town, that all can get behind. It is not something copied from elsewhere or imposed on the town. It grows organically as the town develops. Interestingly, many of the towns in our report used a market to build a sense of purpose and belonging. This is nourished by events that support their identity and allow existing and potential customers to associate with it.

The sense of identity allows them to promote a range of businesses and sectors under this shared purpose. For those reading the report who may be from rural or coastal towns, this sense of shared purpose and identity can also be developed by a programme of events which match the character of the town, and we propose that town representatives come together to review its identity and use the findings as a bedrock for their initiatives.



⁷ Somerset Live article on Whirligig Festival



Collaboration

Context

Post Covid-19 our report highlights the importance of collaboration for success. Examples include collaboration between businesses and stakeholders, between businesses, or within sectors.

South West initiatives:

An example of collaboration between business and key stakeholders can be seen in the **Business Improvement District in Cheltenham**. Cheltenham has a strong council-led marketing organisation (Marketing Cheltenham) and a high profile, successful Business Improvement District (BID). The BID has done a lot of work in reviving activity in the town centre bringing new events such as a popular Christmas ‘Light Up’ event with a big wheel together with other sector-specific events such as ‘The Great Taste of Cheltenham’, ‘Beauty Week’ and ‘Cocktail Week’. It also engaged closely with the council to ensure extra support was available to town centre businesses throughout Covid-19.

Along with the BID and the supportive Cheltenham Borough Council, the town has a progressive marketing organisation which also works to promote and support the area not only to the tourist market, but also to the potential new entrants to the community.

Set up with the council and the BID, **Marketing Cheltenham** sets out its vision as being to “encourage more visitors to the town, to get them to stay longer and to support the local tourism, hospitality and leisure economy.” This, it is hoped, will “support economic growth, new jobs, business creation and culture for the continued benefit of local people.”

Marketing Cheltenham feels symbolic of the new mood in the town to shake off the damage of Covid-19 and create a town that is fit for the future with a strong identity.

"What the BID has achieved over the past five years is in no small part attributable to the support we get from BID businesses and their enthusiasm to get involved with our projects."

Belinda Hunt,
Operations Manager at Cheltenham BID

In **Devizes**, collaboration between stakeholders can be seen in the InDevizes maps project. The Area Board have funded permanent alloy signs with QR codes which link to online maps, created on Google and embedded on the website linked to the InDevizes project (see page 16). These can be updated easily on an ongoing basis.⁸

In **Weston-super-Mare**, collaboration between residents, businesses, investors and visitors can be seen in the **Weston Placemaking Strategy**⁹. Funded and led by North Somerset Council, the strategy has brought together participants from across the town to create a vision for Weston and to provide a clear way forward for planning future initiatives for the town.

A further example of successful collaboration between businesses can be seen in the **Cheltenham TURF initiative**. Cheltenham has a thriving food and drink sector including an array of independent, locally owned food and drink offerings. During the height of the pandemic, a group of owner-operators of independent restaurants, high-end bars and hotels in the area got together to offer mutual support and formed a loose organisation called TURF, (the name is about 'coming onto our turf' with a nod to the green of the Cheltenham Racecourse and the Cotswolds). It was designed to offer a voice for the sector and also to provide help and advice throughout the Covid-19 crisis. It has now established itself as collective of 50+ individual businesses who will work together to help their sector grow.

"I think potentially more businesses are still going because there's a group of people who are always positive and there for them. It's being able to have that avenue to vent to and share which has really helped the independent owners."

Lindsey Holland,

Chair of TURF Cheltenham

This shows a place where enterprise and independence are valued and encouraged.

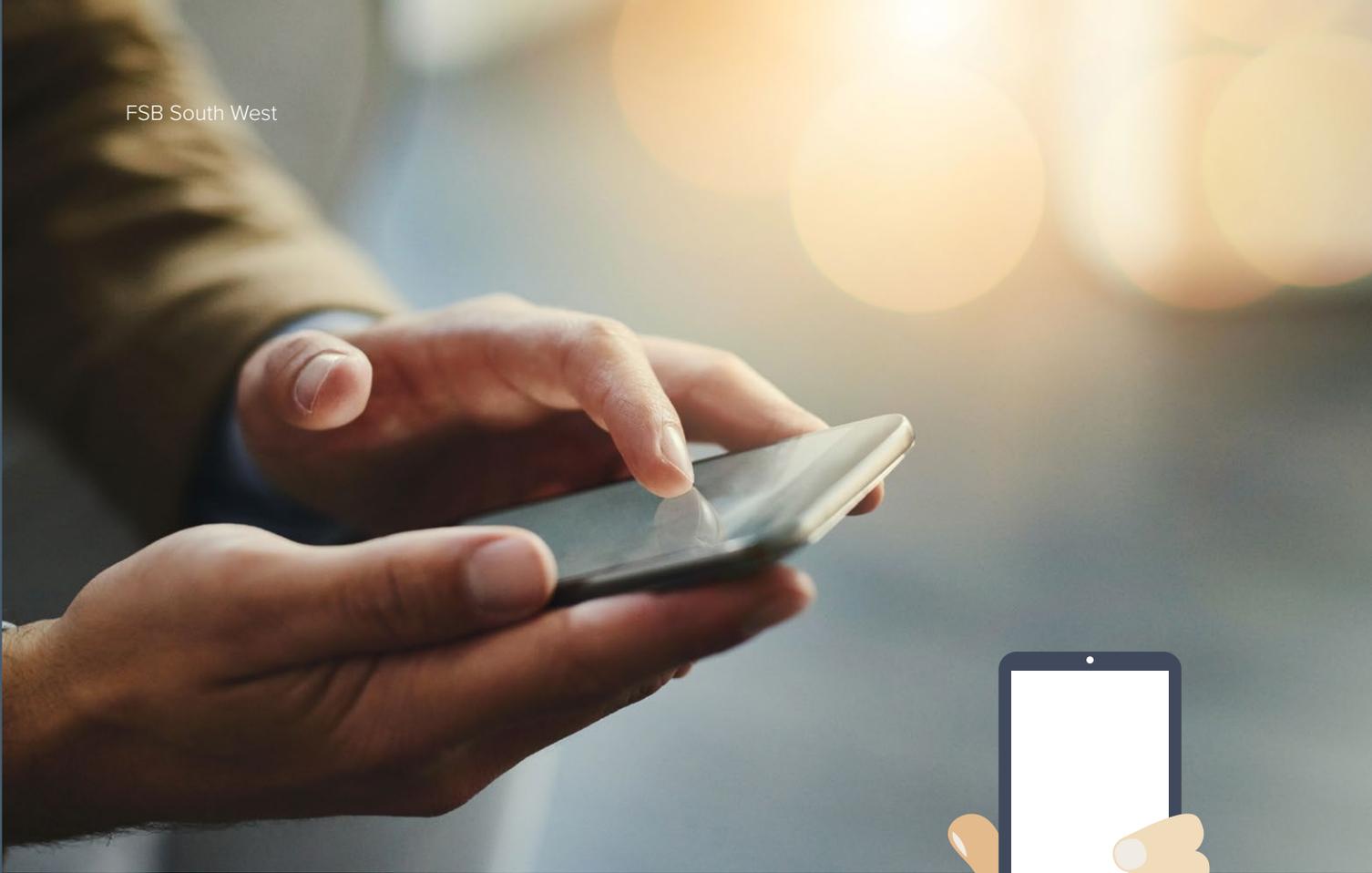
TURF also run events including an online auction of meals and an event to promote the reopening of the member businesses.

In summary, these initiatives show how, instead of competing with each other, businesses in the same sector, such as the hospitality businesses involved in Cheltenham TURF, have shown how they benefit from increased numbers visiting the town, and from additional promotion.

This initiative can be replicated in most sectors with minimum resources. While this can be more difficult to negotiate, we propose that businesses come together to showcase their unique and shared offerings linked to the town identity above. This allows for greater marketing opportunities for all.

⁸ www.indevizes.org.uk/maps

⁹ www.superweston.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Prospectus_weston_super_mare.pdf



Digital Promotion

Context

Before Covid-19, the intersection between physical and digital space was being explored with digital initiatives such as **Shopappy, Big Barn and Good Sixty**, with websites and digital tours also enhancing the experience of visitors. Digital placemaking boosts the social, cultural, environmental and economic value of places by using location-specific digital technology to foster deeper relationships between people and place.¹⁰

The lockdowns in reaction to the pandemic accelerated already growing trends in online retail, with businesses seeing an increased move to online sales and others expanding to reach new customers. Over the next few years, this is set to continue, and it is now obvious that we are at the beginning of enormous social and economic change¹¹.

However, for many small business owners, trading online is a daunting prospect: sourcing the right platform can be expensive, and getting found online in what can be a very noisy marketplace, is also difficult. The pandemic has accelerated the already fast developing need to be able to do business online, whether that is selling goods and services with 'click and collect' or delivery, taking bookings and arranging appointments, or allowing people to book onto events.

¹⁰ www.calvium.com/revitalising-hybrid-high-street-digital-placemaking-for-pragmatists

¹¹ www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GrimseyReview2.pdf

South West initiatives:

All the towns in the study are aiming to reignite their high streets by combining 'clicks and bricks'. **Wimborne** for example uses **Shopappy** successfully. This national shop and support local scheme was funded by the Dorset LEP for their small businesses to use and aims to enable them to compete with online retail giants by harnessing their collective identity as a town.

"The pandemic has shown us that people are passionate about supporting local communities and ShopAppy gives people the opportunity to do this online, in one place. Wimborne has embraced this virtual online shop and currently has more than 40 businesses on this site. When people shop here online, they can browse one business and then discover many more. Nothing replaces visiting the beautiful town of Wimborne, experiencing the culture, history and wonderful events, but ShopAppy gives people more choice in how they buy and provides Wimborne's businesses with another shop window."

Susan Turner,
Wimborne BID Director

ShopAppy also provides a range of training opportunities, including peer networks and training hours scheduled at accessible times for business owners to learn and develop their knowledge and ideas about how they can use their digital presence to get more business.

Our study also shows businesses taking advantage of all forms of **social media** in a collaborative way to help promote local business and encourage footfall. Examples include a thriving **Liskeard Page**¹² on **Facebook** which gives information and promotes businesses in the town centre. This initiative is run by volunteers together with the Tourist Information Centre and many people from outside the town use it. It is a very successful way for the businesses to entice customers to visit. The town has also launched a Facebook page, entitled **Cattle Market Maker**, to promote and support local artisans based in its new regenerated Cattle Market.

¹² www.facebook.com/yourliskeard



InDevizes¹³ is an initiative also run by a group of local volunteers who have set up social media pages and a website (www.indevizes.org.uk) to promote the independent businesses in Devizes and to organise 'Indie Days' in the town. The first Indie Day in 2020 brought many people into town in a Covid-19 safe environment after the first lockdown. They also successfully promoted late night opening at very short notice prior to the second lockdown.

In summary, there was a need for innovation during Covid-19, but our towns show that this is part of their ethos. Innovative ideas and the harnessing of digital technology were apparent before the pandemic and are continuing as we move forward.

This ability for forward thinking is essential if our towns are to continue to respond to changing consumer expectations. The innovation projects showcased by our towns include collaborative marketing projects such as town Facebook sites which promote the identity and collaboration projects. Towns can also consider recruiting a town digital manager to help develop and coordinate their digital presence which is even more important in these changing and complex times.

¹³ www.indevizes.org.uk



Keep it Local

Context

Changes in consumer behaviour as well as seismic technological shifts have led to high streets across the UK evolving to reflect new consumer behaviours¹⁴.

Home working has also had a profound effect on our towns. Figures from the Office for National Statistics report that on average in 2019, 27% of the workforce worked from home at some point according to Annual Population Survey data. This increased to an average of 37% in 2020, following government guidance to work from home where possible.¹⁵

Towns are looking to the 20 minute neighbourhood concept,¹⁶ where residents can access everything they need within a 20-minute walk or cycle, and are focussing on creating more of a neighbourhood than a shopping destination with more housing, green spaces, schools and recreation.

All these trends provide a real incentive for towns to explore new ways to embrace a local focus. Our research highlighted ways the South West towns are reflecting new consumer behaviours and adapting to the extreme challenges we see today.

It was clear from our research that high streets embody a unique local ecosystem¹⁷. As previous reports have suggested, high streets are not just about retail economies, they are part of a social fabric, providing a meeting point and engendering pride in the community.

Our research found high streets are still a gathering point for the community with town centres offering more than retail outlets, supporting the local community with entertainment, leisure, business/office space and shops.

South West Initiatives:

Encouraging **local, sustainable shopping** was a key theme emerging from the research; with towns using innovative ideas to increase footfall and to persuade people to linger longer.

In **Cheltenham and Tavistock**, initiatives to develop and promote **gift cards** to attract shoppers have been successful.

The **Tavistock card** is a 'Mastercard-based' gift card which can be used, for example, across more than 50 businesses in Tavistock town centre.¹⁸ It works in the same way as a department store gift voucher but instead of allowing the customer to shop in one destination, it opens up a range of independent businesses and visitor attractions.

Cheltenham estimate their card has been responsible for an estimated £2million increase in revenue.

¹⁴ www.fsb.org.uk/campaign/high-street-hub.html

¹⁵ www.ONS.gov.uk article on business and individual attitudes towards the future of home working in the UK

¹⁶ www.tcpa.org.uk/the-20-minute-neighbourhood

¹⁷ www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/streets-ahead.html

¹⁸ www.visit-tavistock.co.uk/giftcard

Alternatively, **Frome** used the national campaign '**Fiver Fest**' to champion its independent shops and retailers. Part of the **Totally Locally initiative**, 'Fiver Fest' was a celebration of local businesses and encouraged people to shop locally with retailers showcasing items people can buy for £5. Supporting independent retailers with this type of initiative, both helps the local economy and also gives an extra boost to businesses who have struggled from Covid-19 closures and restrictions.

Frome also advertised the festival digitally through its website:

www.discoverfrome.co.uk/fiver-fest-2021

and on Instagram using the hashtag **#FromeFiverFest**



Regeneration



Context

In their report, 'The future of Towns and Cities post Covid-19', KPMG highlight the need for help for towns across the UK to rethink the purpose of their town centres. The high streets of the future, they argue, will need to become multi-purpose locations, combining retail and hospitality amenities with residential, education, healthcare, cultural, technology, and community. There is a need for towns to develop plans that are business-like and focused on transforming the place into a complete community hub incorporating health, housing, arts, education, entertainment, leisure, business/office space, as well as some shops, while developing a unique selling proposition (USP) discussed in the 'identity' theme above²⁰.

Regeneration projects linking collaboration with innovation and local shopping initiatives can be successful without the need for large budgets.

South West Initiatives:

Liskeard benefits from a community-led local development programme which partners Liskeard Town Council and Plymouth College of Art to strengthen the creative economics sector including arts and crafts²¹.

"Liskeard regeneration project brought together input from Cornwall Council, Liskeard Town Council and Liskerett Community Centre with all parties recognising that in order to regenerate the area they need to share plans for assets and resources in the spirit of co-design and co-delivery."

Memorandum of Understanding,
Cornwall Council, 2018

The **cattle market regeneration project** in Liskeard was made possible through collaboration. Following several public consultation events Liskeard secured funding for the design and construction of the first phase of a development to provide flexible workspace aimed at small and micro businesses in the creative industries in the old cattle market.

¹⁹ KPMG The Future of Towns and Cities post Covid 19

²⁰ www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GrimseyReview2.pdf

²¹ PCA Memorandum of Understanding, (2021)

The hub will promote collaboration and innovation. The proposed work shed will provide workspace/meeting areas over two floors with the first floor aimed at clean creative industries, whilst the ground floor will be used for ‘messy’ uses such as painting and sculpting etc. An area of public realm/outdoor market space will be created in between the new buildings with new seating areas.

Towns which do not have large scale regeneration projects can also seek to improve the footfall to retail businesses for example, by welcoming non-retail ventures taking over traditional shopping sites to help boost the potential appeal of the whole area.

In **Gloucester**, the loss of Debenhams, its town centre anchor store, was a major concern for all businesses in its near vicinity, worried for the knock-on effect on people coming into the town. Instead of an alternative retailer, it was the University of Gloucestershire who bought the site. The University (with full political and local business support) plans to transform the building into a modern campus for teaching, learning and community partnerships. This will play a key role in the regeneration of the town, ensuring more activity and footfall for existing retail units and encouraging new student-friendly businesses to open around the new campus.

Towns can also revive the look and feel of their high streets. Across the country, there are over 60 high streets who have been offered funding through the **High Streets Heritage Action Zone** initiative. The lead partners in each place (mostly local authorities) are working with Historic England to develop and deliver schemes that will transform and restore disused and dilapidated buildings into new homes, shops, workplaces and community spaces, restoring local historic character and improving the public realm.

A South West example of this can be seen in **Weston-super-Mare**. A study by North Somerset Council²² found many historic shops in Weston had suffered from decades of neglect, inappropriate repairs and unsympathetic additions, with numerous properties sitting empty. In response, the Town Centre Regeneration Programme (part of the Heritage Action Zone) is being used to restore the shops to their former glory.

The council identified 45 premises in desperate need of enhancement and has made thousands of pounds of matched funding available to businesses to restore their shop fronts. Working with a team of consultants with expertise in repairing historic buildings, they have also developed a design guide for the shop fronts to provide a consistent identity for the town.

“An attractive high street encourages more usage of the town centre, and these grants can make a huge difference to the front of Weston’s shops. It’s no coincidence that businesses that invest in the appearance of their stores, benefit from more trade.”

Councillor Mark Canniford,

Executive Member for Placemaking and Economy at North Somerset Council

While not every town has a regeneration project, we suggest that towns around the country explore collaborative opportunities with stakeholders to combine retail and hospitality amenities with residential, education, healthcare, culture and technology to develop community hubs.

²² www.n-somerset.gov.uk/news/westons-department-store-be-first-undertake-shopfront-enhancement-work

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

In this review of the initiatives being undertaken in our South West towns, much was learnt about how our towns are developing schemes to bring together local people and businesses. As Mark Carney pointed out, **“it is clear that post Covid-19 people’s economic narratives will change”** for **“traditional drivers of value have been shaken, new ones will gain prominence, and there’s a possibility that the gulf between what markets value and what people value will close.”**²³

Our towns miss out on much central government funding and therefore, as we have seen, develop initiatives on their own. In our vision for the future of South West towns, we conclude that five common themes are central to why these towns stand out.

The key finding of the report was how these individual themes support and build on each other to create prosperous, cohesive towns.

We have grounded the recommendations into 5 key themes below:

1. Create and develop your own Identity
2. Working in Collaboration
3. Working together for Digital Promotion
4. Keep it Local
5. Regeneration

²³ www.calvium.com/revitalising-hybrid-high-street-digital-placemaking-for-pragmatists

1. Create and develop your own Identity

Our report shows that those towns that have a **strong sense of what they stand for** can use this to attract visitors and businesses.

Towns should aim to **get away from being an identikit** of each other and should use and enhance their own particular history, culture, physical layout and unique independent retail and hospitality businesses to make them stand out.

They should aim to be a place where **locals feel pride** and want to be associated with, whilst also **attracting tourists** who want to see something different to their own hometowns.

Our recommendations are:

- **Not to impose an identity on a town:** It must fit with its own history, the amenities available and what is needed in the local area. It needs to be something everyone in the town can get behind and be ambassadors for.
- **Offer a complimentary identity:** It is important to look at what other local towns are offering to ensure a complimentary identity is created, rather than to compete with a neighbour, which will confuse potential visitors.
- **Allow everyone to feel involved through consultations with all stakeholders:** Ensure documents are simple, short, and easy to understand making them accessible online. It is also important to ensure local businesses and business groups are aware of any upcoming consultations.
- **Visit businesses:** Face-to-face contact is important for building a trusting relationship with small businesses, and local business groups, fostering good long-term communication. They need to understand the identity and to buy into it to enable it to succeed.
- **Talk to and share information with neighbouring local authorities:** This means spotting opportunities for small businesses to get involved in work or projects in neighbouring authorities and encouraging the diversification of ideas.
- **Ensure that the sensitivities, challenges and opportunities for small businesses are captured in any town centre and tourism strategy area of the corporate plan:** This includes working with other local stakeholders to identify the coherent tourism offer available in local communities and to identify a distinctive brand for the area.
- **Developing Business Improvement Districts:** Support businesses who want to investigate the feasibility of introducing a Business Improvement District (BID).
- **Explore new projects:** Projects such as Heritage Action Zones can give credibility and depth to the identity of a town.



2. Working in Collaboration

This report shows that when businesses work together, they can benefit from expertise and greater marketing exposure.

Our recommendations are:

- **Have a dedicated Councillor and Single Point of Contact:** These can act as small business champions.
- **Reach out to as many parties as possible:** Helping to facilitate opportunities to work together.
- **Encourage joint funding initiatives:** Such as funding a town manager, a town website or planters and seating in an area.
- **Investigate economies of scale:** By businesses all using the same contractor, to clean windows or repaint fascias, costs can be reduced.
- **Initiate a town forum:** This can be used to discuss new projects and having a small budget available will help to support this.
- **Work with business organisations:** Using their database of members can expand the reach of collaboration.
- **Make the most of BIDs:** Support them where there is local interest and use them to canvas opinion and support where they exist.
- **Explore working with larger corporations:** Use their resources to support the town and involve them in new projects.



3. Working together for Digital Promotion

Where we see genuine high street innovation, best practice is often not shared and far too many agencies remain in silos²⁴. Working together for digital promotion is a key theme and is vitally important in these changing and challenging times.

Our recommendations are:

- **Launch a website for the town:** Ensure it is kept up to date and includes events and promotions from as many stakeholders as possible.
- **Encourage 'click and collect' schemes:** Enabling smaller retailers to be more competitive and to attract people into the town.
- **Provide online shopping platforms:** Supporting the smaller businesses in the town who may not have the skills to access this technology.
- **Create an active town social media presence:** This will deepen its identity and brand.
- **Work with the local Destination Marketing Organisation:** Ensure the town is featured and that activities and events are promoted via their website.
- **Encourage promotion of the online presence of the town:** Get businesses to display signs and promote online resources around the town to encourage people to interact between visits.

²⁴ www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GrimseyReview2.pdf



4. Keep it Local

Changes in consumer behaviour, which had begun pre Covid-19 and are continuing in response to both the pandemic and to environmental issues, have led to increasing opportunities for local retailers.

Our recommendations are:

- **Improving parking:** Upgrade parking meters and systems to enable multiple ways to pay. This could include contactless or app-based parking charging. It is important to ensure parking does not put people off staying for longer so 'pay on exit' is better than 'paying on arrival'. Electric Vehicle charging points are another important factor. Free parking on key dates i.e., Christmas, 'small business days' can also be effective.
- **Invest in technology that shows live parking availability:** By showing its location and cost, visitors will feel confident they know how to navigate the town.
- **Where possible, invest in 'park and ride' or 'park and rail' schemes:** Reducing congestion by leveraging funds through Section 106 and CIL and other revenue streams.
- **Prominent signage and information:** Ensure signage for any events in town is clear and prominent from all directions not just to locals.
- **Conduct a high street review:** Identify risks and opportunities for a changing high street, to ensure that the town adapts and thrives in the future.
- **Support national campaigns:** Especially those that highlight the value of supporting local businesses like Small Business Saturday.
- **Consider special events:** Explore initiatives such as Frome's Fiver Fridays to attract people into town.
- **Introduce a shopping gift voucher for the town:** Encourage as many businesses as possible to accept and promote it.
- **Coordinate a local delivery scheme:** Facilitate this across multiple businesses that do not currently offer this service.
- **Provision of maps and digital maps:** These highlight shopping areas and make them easily accessible to visitors.



5. Regeneration

Our report highlights the need for towns to develop plans that are business-like and focused on becoming complete community hubs, incorporating health, housing, arts, education, entertainment, leisure, business/office space, in addition to shops.

Our recommendations are:

- **Embrace the alfresco:** Allow businesses to make the most of their outdoor space, where appropriate.
- **Have efficient systems:** Work to process applications for change of use, improvements to premises and new developments at the earliest opportunity.
- **Local development plans:** Design these to ensure there is a range of affordable and flexible local business premises available, both to encourage new enterprises and to allow existing businesses to grow.
- **Review accommodation strategies:** Investigate the feasibility of providing council managed office and light industrial space for businesses that offer easy in/easy out low rental agreements.
- **Improve the planning application process for small housing developments:** Work with small developers to maximise the Governments ambition of 20% new homes to be delivered by small developers.
- **Work with and encourage new entrants and landowners:** Help them to release small pockets of developable land.
- **Tackle the problem of absent commercial landlords:** When they allow empty properties to fall into disrepair work with them to resolve this.
- **Consider using business rates discounts:** These can encourage new businesses to take over empty retail premises.
- **Encourage new ventures:** Introduce pop-up shops and ease the bureaucracy around running ad hoc markets days and special events.
- **Introduce minimum standards for responding to businesses:** Especially on licensing and inspections, such as food hygiene ratings, allowing businesses to open and operate safely as quickly as possible.
- **Rejuvenate:** Implement regular street cleaning and repainting of shop fascia, provision of flowers and green space which can all help to regenerate an area for minimal cost.



The Covid-19 pandemic has put in motion transformational changes that are likely to dominate the agenda for years to come²⁵. Small businesses are at the heart of our towns and in this report have shown themselves to be the backbone of the community.

These findings call for stakeholders in the region to encourage a culture of 3 F's:

- **Freedom** to pursue to their identity
- **Funding** to support their initiatives
- **Fearlessness** in embracing the digital/hybrid future of their towns.

Overall, our vision for the future of South West towns is for all stakeholders to come together and use this report and recommendations for ideas of how to create a shared purpose for their towns based on a strong locally relevant identity which sets it apart from others in the area and will attract residents and visitors alike.

"Towns are evolving - fast. Even prior to the pandemic, towns and particularly retail floor space was under pressure but the pandemic has further challenged many places. Some have done well. Those that are well managed, with lots of independent traders serving local communities and have an e-commerce footprint have often improved but some, often those that were struggling before, have struggled further. Moreover, many individual businesses who have lost cash flow are finding recruitment difficult and have had to use reserves to survive.

However, I am optimistic. Those towns and businesses that are fleet of foot, deliver a clear offer to their local communities and excellent service will have the opportunity to thrive. We are all keen to see our local places do well – those places that can show agility and authenticity will I hope weather this storm.

Supporting town centres and places generally is very much at the forefront of our thinking and consequently we were pleased to support this study which we hope provides both insights and possible solutions to both these challenges and opportunities."

David Ralph,

Chief Executive of Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership

²⁵ <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2021/01/the-future-of-towns-and-cities-post-covid-19-how-will-covid-19-transform-england-s-town-and-city-centres.pdf>

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More successful towns across the South West equates to more successful small businesses.

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- Peter Wheelhouse and Vivienne Whitaker from Frome Town Council
- Richard Wilcox, Chair of South West BID Group

Plus of course all the FSB Staff and volunteers across the South West.



As the largest trade association for business in the UK, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) offers members a wide range of vital business services and a powerful voice in Government. Its aim is to help smaller businesses achieve to their ambitions. **More information is available at www.fsb.org.uk.** More successful towns across the South West equates to more successful small businesses.

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