

Assessment of the Market Towns Initiative: a summary



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Market Towns Team
Countryside Agency
John Dower House
Crescent Place
Cheltenham
GL50 3RA

www.countryside.gov.uk
Telephone: 01242 521381
Fax: 01242 584270

September 2004

Front cover photograph of Malton © Countryside Agency/Simon Warner

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The information contained in this publication represents a summary of the key issues and points of view that arose during the research. For each of the issues discussed, we present here the broad consensus of opinion, not necessarily the views of any individuals or particular group. The more detailed research findings are available in the full report, *Assessment of the Market Towns Initiative*, which has been produced for the Countryside Agency and Defra by Entec. This is available on the Countryside Agency's website at www.countryside.gov.uk/market-towns

1. Introduction

This document summarises recent research that we commissioned into the successes, and obstacles to success, experienced by market towns involved in the Market Towns Initiative (MTI). The research, which forms part of our programme of monitoring and evaluating the MTI, draws out the lessons to be learned for the Initiative's future development. The findings will also help to identify for partner organisations, such as the rural development agencies (RDAs), how market towns in their area have gained from taking part and what else needs to be done to ensure continued success.

The Market Towns Initiative

Market towns have a unique role to play, offering all elements of life, both economic and social. But while some towns are thriving, many others have experienced decline in recent years. The impact of out-of-town shopping centres, closure of livestock markets and increased mobility for many people have reduced the viability of high street businesses, social cohesiveness and the quality and diversity of services. These have had an impact in both the towns and in the surrounding countryside (or 'hinterland').

The Government's Rural White Paper (November 2000) emphasised the importance of market towns, and the growing concern about their future. We developed a web-based Market Towns Toolkit, of which the main element is the healthcheck, to help address these concerns. We are also testing new ideas and demonstrating solutions to the issues experienced by market towns, specifically through a programme of Beacon Towns.

We are providing direct support to 235 towns in partnership with others (especially the RDAs) through the MTI. Its aim is to bring a new lease of life to towns so that they provide convenient access to the services that people depend on, and is based on the principles that:

- market towns should be the basis of sustainable rural communities;
- local communities in market towns and their surrounding countryside should have a say in the future of their market towns;
- the revitalisation of market towns should improve people's quality of life, provide access to essential services, jobs and goods, and improve the diversity and vitality of rural economies.

To date the Initiative has consisted of:

- a web-based toolkit available to communities in all market towns, giving advice on how to carry out a healthcheck, prepare an action plan and seek sources of funding and advice;
- support for coordinators (who help communities to carry out healthchecks) and project managers (who help deliver action plans);
- testing out solutions to the issues that affect market towns through research and the Beacon Towns programme;
- an electronic learning network that enables market town professionals to exchange ideas and good practice;
- support for Action for Market Towns;
- support for England's Market Towns Forum.

In addition, we run grant programmes, such as the Rural Transport Partnership fund, which support the delivery of action plans. The RDAs are also supporting material improvements in market towns.

What is a market town?

Market towns are towns in rural England with a variety of backgrounds, usually with populations from 2,000 to 20,000. In defining market towns, the town's ability to serve people in both the town and its surrounding countryside is more significant than population size. Some towns are thriving, some are in decline, but all have the potential to carry out a healthcheck and prepare an action plan to ensure a stronger future.

The market towns toolkit

The toolkit is a web-based source of information for communities who wish to take an active part in revitalising their market town and its surrounding countryside. It can be found on our website at www.countryside.gov.uk/market-towns.

The toolkit contains practical guidance and information for local people who want to take an active part in revitalising market towns including the market towns healthcheck handbook, the healthcheck worksheets, and information about sources of advice and financial support.

The market towns healthcheck

The healthcheck helps local people to identify the economic, environmental and social strengths and weaknesses of their town and surrounding countryside, and to create a vision for the future as the basis for an action plan. It:

- covers the whole town and its surrounding countryside;
- enables people to look at a wide range of issues that affect quality of life;
- can be used by people in market towns of any size; and
- consists of a series of worksheets containing questions about environmental, social and economic issues.

Carrying out a healthcheck requires commitment from all members of the community. The process should be led by a partnership of market town interests, and supported by a market towns coordinator.

The action plan

A market town action plan is based on the findings of the healthcheck. It sets out a vision for a newly-revitalised town and its surrounding countryside and explains the projects that will achieve the vision. It demonstrates that the pressures and opportunities identified during the healthcheck are being addressed. Implementation of the action plan should be managed by a project manager.

Research methodology

In order to identify good practice and any lessons learned to date, we asked Entec UK Ltd to carry out research on our behalf. The research, which took place during February and March 2004, consisted of the following:

- A national questionnaire, which was sent to between two and four members of each market town partnership, including the partnership officer and chairperson.
- Telephone interviews with officers from the Countryside Agency, Government Offices and the RDAs.
- Telephone interviews with 108 MTI partnership officers and 209 members.
- Detailed face-to-face interviews with selected MTI project coordinators and other partnership members. These interviews focused on local matters within the context of the general themes already identified.

The research focussed on the following general themes:

- the main difficulties faced by market towns in ensuring the long-term success of their towns and how these difficulties might be overcome;
- support received by market towns from government and other partners, in terms of resources and links with other plans, programmes and strategies;
- issues affecting the vitality of the town, its regeneration, and the part played by the MTI;
- changes that might affect the role of market towns in the future and how the MTI helps towns to position themselves to benefit from these changes;
- knowledge and support for the MTI, and how its successes have been disseminated; and
- the future direction of the MTI.

2. The healthcheck approach

The MTI healthcheck provides a focal point for activity, a medium through which local communities can express both local and strategic issues, and a model for widespread adoption. It is generally seen as a successful way to address key issues within the town. However, reservations were expressed about both the resources required to prepare a healthcheck and its usefulness as a strategy document.

Healthchecks: the process

Healthchecks have been completed, or are nearing completion, by most of the market towns that are involved in the MTI. Many towns have also completed action plans. The healthchecks themselves were carried out by a range of individuals, including MTI coordinators, consultants and graduates.

Elements of success

- Many towns recognise the value of the healthcheck as a way to engage with local people and raise the profile of their town.
- The more closely local people are involved in the healthcheck process, the greater their sense of ownership.
- The action plan that follows the healthcheck provides a key focus for towns, and is often seen as central to the work that is then undertaken.

Obstacles to success

- Whether they are consultants, members of the partnership or volunteers, it can be difficult to find the right people to carry out the healthcheck.
- The main difficulties that people cited in actually undertaking a healthcheck were the timescales involved, the size of the task, getting people involved and accessing the right information. Difficulties can often be overcome with more funding, greater reliance on local knowledge and on help from partners and experts, and by those involved dedicating more of their own time. However, difficulties cannot always be overcome.
- Some officers said that they found the process of undertaking a healthcheck rather daunting, and many partnerships and coordinators experienced difficulties when focusing on delivering the healthcheck.

- There was sometimes a lack of clarity about the future benefits of the healthcheck (eg its role in providing baseline information for funding bids).
- Many of the partnerships that embark on the healthcheck are newly formed, so have little experience in commissioning and managing projects. This can mean that healthchecks are poorly focussed, leading to delays in them being adopted. This has had repercussions in terms of the preparation of action plans, and the identification and delivery of projects.
- Delays in the process can tarnish the MTI's image, as can misconceptions that there are significant funds available through the MTI.

Key message

A pre-requisite of successful delivery, and of a focussed and timely healthcheck, is to draw up a thorough brief and identify an individual with experience in commissioning and managing projects.

The ability of MTI officers or partnerships to access support and advice, either from a local authority or from the Countryside Agency, has a direct bearing on the quality of completed healthchecks and action plans.

Healthchecks: the benefits

Many benefits are perceived to come from the healthcheck approach.

Elements of success

Healthchecks are considered to be valuable in:

- establishing a useful ‘snapshot’ of activity, helping to identify new issues and refine old ones, and forming a base of information from which to produce an action plan;
- providing the foundation for funding bids;
- engaging local communities.

Obstacles to success

- Healthchecks require significant time and resources. As a consequence, they are sometimes considered to have delayed the process of identifying and starting projects and putting them into action.
- As the healthcheck provides only a snapshot of the town’s situation, some towns would like to review and update the information, yet are prevented from doing so because of the resources required.

Key message

Healthchecks provide a valuable source of information about a town and surrounding settlements at any one point in time, and help to clarify issues for action.

To make the most of the knowledge gained through the healthcheck, they should be reviewed on a regular basis.

How healthchecks fit with other appraisal processes

Some towns may already have taken part in processes that are similar to the healthcheck, before joining the MTI.

Elements of success

- In such cases, many towns still considered the healthcheck to be a useful complementary exercise, particularly because its remit is often broader than more focussed or specific studies.

- Regional officers felt that the healthcheck provided the town with the opportunity to review and possibly identify new issues if a town appraisal or the like was already in place.
- Several towns that are outside the MTI have carried out their own healthcheck or a variation of the healthcheck, indicating that they consider it to be a useful process to undertake.
- Towns that are taking part in the emerging Small Towns Initiative in the South East (being developed by SEEDA) will have to undertake a healthcheck. And in the North West, the healthcheck approach is applied widely as part of the sub-regional arrangements for rural funding.

Obstacles to success

- Perhaps understandably, some towns that had carried out similar appraisal work were reluctant to embark on another exercise, considering that the healthcheck was another “hoop to jump through”. This is especially the case where plans or projects following the original appraisal have not been put into action, or where delivery has been postponed while the healthcheck is underway. This can lead to disenchantment with the process.

Key message

It should be possible for the findings from existing appraisal work to form the core around which additional healthcheck information is placed, providing the existing information is up-to-date and relevant.

The healthcheck is now a recognised tool for collecting baseline information. It is therefore likely that towns undertaking appraisals will follow the general principles established by the healthcheck approach. Such appraisals should become increasingly complementary to the MTI process.

Addressing common issues

Not surprisingly, many of the same issues arise when towns undertake their healthcheck. The extent to which these issues are taken forward at local, regional and national levels, however, varies.

Elements of success

- Strategic issues identified through the healthcheck are generally being collated in the towns through specific strategies, plans and programmes and by partnership working. This can be on an individual town basis or through the establishment of regional market town forums. For example, Rural Action East in the East of England is bringing together regional issues at a strategic level. Partnership working with other towns or with other organisations allows common issues to be raised.

Regional market town forums

Regional forums have been developed, or are being developed, in most of the regions as an integrated, strategic resource for market town revitalisation. Their purpose is for individual MTI partnerships to join together with other partnerships and with outside agencies (such as the RDA, English Heritage, Business in the Community, and Action for Market Towns) to engage with each other at the regional level. By promoting joined-up thinking, forum members can share good practice and access additional funding. Although a further tier within the MTI structure, they provide a common point of reference, advice and support which MTI partnerships and officers welcome. At their best, the regional forums are influencing stakeholders to orientate their own programmes towards addressing the issues identified by the market towns.

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Many of the same issues, such as transport, affordable housing and service provision, arise when towns undertake their healthcheck.

- At a national level, the Countryside Agency has collated a list of key issues for market towns, following analysis of many completed healthchecks. The Beacon Towns programme is a recognised mechanism through which these common issues and solutions can be explored. It is envisaged that, through shared information and good practice, the experiences of the towns that are involved in this initiative will provide a valuable resource to other market towns in the future.

Obstacles to success

- While collation and dissemination of common issues generally appears to be working well at the town level, mechanisms at regional and national level appear to be less consistent.
- Also less clear is how these common issues and themes are being taken forward into action.

Key message

While various mechanisms do exist to share knowledge and experience, and to identify common issues, the picture varies across the regions.

There is potential for the regional evaluations that are currently being done to identify common strategic issues, and their findings collated at a national level. A number of regions are doing or are about to do a regional evaluation of the MTI which should allow the MTI work to be built upon.

Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum

The Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum is an independent network of representatives from the county's rural towns, parishes and community organisations. The Forum, which was established in 1995, is core funded through the South West Regional Development Agency, Gloucestershire Rural Community Council and the Countryside Agency. It provides a networking forum that allows organisations to exchange ideas and support each other. Twenty-two towns from Gloucestershire are involved, of which seven are part of the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative. The forum has produced a 'community toolkit' which provides guidance to communities about getting projects off the ground and sustaining them in the long term. The forum, which has European, national and regional links, assists with the following:

- identifying and helping to secure external funding;
- providing key resources, equipment, skills and professional expertise;
- training in personal and committee skills.



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The Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum helps community partnerships to coordinate consultation. Here, local people are being consulted about plans to redevelop a site in Dursley.

3. The partnership approach

The MTI process is characterised by diverse forms of partnerships, which make the most of existing relationships and seek to minimise conflicts of interest.

The make up of partnerships

Market town partnerships differ markedly from town to town in terms of their size and composition. There is generally strong public sector representation, but with less active private sector involvement. The status of the partnerships also varies; some are voluntary organisations, while others have development trust or charitable status.

Elements of success

- Partnership members appear to have found the whole process broadly positive and have benefited from access to contacts, networking and a feeling of achievement.
 - Partnerships have been established in a variety of ways; some have evolved from existing partnerships or groups, others through the initiative of local authorities or regional Countryside Agency representatives. Those partnerships that already existed when the MTI came along may previously have been focussing on particular issues for the town, and as such have taken on a broader remit through the MTI.
 - The public sector typically comprises around two-thirds of the total number of seats per partnership (including a mix of local authority, county council, town councils, hinterland parishes and other public sector organisations). Voluntary and community sector groups represent around a quarter of a partnership's members.
 - The size of a partnership in itself does not appear to influence its success or accountability.
 - Some partnerships, particularly those where coordinators are in place, act in a strategic way, setting goals and agendas; others take on more of a delivery role.
- It is clear that many individuals on partnerships are already actively involved in other local groups or organisations.

Obstacles to success

- Over-reliance on key individuals (particularly volunteers) within the MTI can mean that only a limited number of people are contributing. As a result, partnerships may not have access to the full range of skills required.
- Some towns expressed concerns that participation by individual partnership members is waning. This may be because their initial enthusiasm for the initiative is starting to 'wear off', because they have succeeded in what they wanted to achieve, or because they are 'burnt out'.
- Those who are putting in their own time, either as volunteers or from the private sector, are often making considerable sacrifices to be there. Maintaining their enthusiasm can be difficult, especially where there are long lead-in times to project implementation.
- Many MTI partnerships have to work hard to be inclusive. It can be very difficult to achieve the involvement of private sector organisations, such as individual local businesses and business clubs; they therefore represent only a small part of many towns' partnerships. However, businesses can benefit a great deal from engagement with the partnership, especially when the majority of funding on offer is economically focussed. Similarly, partnerships recognise that young people are also traditionally difficult to engage, and are not always represented on partnerships.
- Similarly, while partnerships recognise that community involvement has been one of the key successes of the MTI they are also aware that their ability to reach out to hinterland communities has been less successful.

Key message

Successful partnerships need to include a range of local public, community and business groups. Where existing structures exist, opportunities to build upon them should be taken; where there are none, the importance of inviting officers from the local authority and people from within the community who are known to have energy, knowledge and experience is crucial.

The key to getting the job done appears to be the commitment of members to the partnership and the resources they can bring to it.

How partnerships work

Partnerships focus on project delivery, funding and their future role and constitution. The towns say that they give broadly equal consideration to social, economic and environmental issues, but that there is pressure from significant funding sources to demonstrate economic benefits.

Elements of success

- Generally speaking, no single group dominates partnerships, although public bodies such as the district or town/community council are perceived to have most influence. This is perhaps not surprising given that these organisations are often the source of most of the funding, are the regulatory body and have most experience in regeneration activities.
- A significant proportion of towns have developed much looser ties with local authorities; in these cases, the MTI has been a way for the town to create a role for itself, develop feelings of local distinctiveness and set an agenda that is different from that of the local authority. This appears to be the case in towns that are not the main town within the local authority's area, where the MTI town may feel its voice has not been heard in the past.
- Many MTI partnerships are structured around a series of topic groups which concentrate on particular issues, such as transport, ICT, and town centre enhancements.

- Social, economic and environmental issues are broadly perceived to be given equal consideration within the towns.
- Partnership meetings tend to focus on project delivery, funding and the future role and constitution of the partnership. Significant other issues discussed include transport, the local economy and the environment.

Obstacles to success

- Where organisations do dominate individual partnerships, it is usually the local authority. This comes through the local authority's ability to provide resources (in terms of officer time, administration, advice and funding) or through the authority taking on delivery of particular projects.
- Although there appears to be a balance between social, environmental and economic issues, there is pressure from significant funding sources to demonstrate economic benefits. In some cases where funding is being applied for a particular project, emphasis is placed on the number of jobs or other economic benefits that will be created, even when the project itself is essentially a social or environmental one.
- At times there is confusion about the roles that the Countryside Agency and the RDAs play in the MTI. The input of the relevant Countryside Agency and RDA officers is considered to work best when they have ownership, experience and responsibility for the MTI.

Key message

It is good practice for partnerships to include topic groups, sitting under the main management or steering group. This structure allows the topic groups to concentrate more on the specifics of delivery, leaving the steering group to attend to strategy and process. Local people can also air their views on issues of interest to them, without being lost within wider partnership discussions.

Relations within partnerships

Although many partnerships function without conflict, tensions are not unusual at different times in the process and between different members or groups. Most partnerships include members from the town council, and it is not uncommon for the two to run into conflict, particularly during the MTI's initial stages. Difficulties can also arise in relation to people's perceptions of the MTI project officer's role.

Elements of success

- In spite of initial tensions, the experience for many partnerships is that, over time, the town council becomes an active and truly genuine partner. It may, for example, come to take a more active role in regeneration, perhaps through its involvement in community grants. And in some dual-town partnerships, the MTI has been the catalyst for town councils to come together as a more powerful voice. MTI partnerships and town councils also frequently work well together on individual projects.
- Steps can be taken to minimise any misunderstandings about the project officer's role. This includes agreeing a clear job description, which is signed up to by all partnership members. Towns also say that project officers are more effective, and have a higher profile, if they are within the market town, rather than at an administrative centre elsewhere.

Obstacles to success

- Where town councils are hostile to the MTI this may be because they are struggling with the concept of an unelected regeneration body, feel threatened by the MTI (in that the partnership can access funds over which the town council has only limited control), or because the partnership is claiming success for initiatives that the council itself has already tried to move forward.
- In some cases, tensions between the MTI and town council appear to be based on individual personality clashes as much as anything else.
- Differences in perception about the project officer's role, both within the partnership and by the officer themselves, are a source of conflict. For example, project officers may be employed through the MTI for wide-ranging rural regeneration work, yet others may feel that their focus should be on the town alone.

Key message

An important way to address any tensions that arise between the town council and the MTI partnership is to keep the town council involved and to maintain good communication.

The project officer's roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined, so that misunderstandings and false expectations are avoided.

The pros and cons of partnership working

A clear message from the research is that partnership working is an effective way to bring different interests together, nurturing community participation and acting as a focal point for funding. When asked about possible improvements, access to more funding, improving the balance of membership and greater support from sponsoring agencies came to the fore.

Elements of success

- MTI partnerships have developed a strong track record, and are considered by many to be working well, particularly in bringing together interest groups and engaging the local community in regeneration of their towns. Members also say that partnerships help to imbue towns with a more confident, 'can do' culture.
- The main benefits from the partnership approach were cited as: different groups working together; community participation in regeneration; the relationships which are built up; and bringing in public funding and maximising project success. Other perceived benefits include raising aspirations; having a clear vision; using the knowledge and skills of others; generating innovative ideas; and building capacity.
- It is widely perceived that partnerships have enabled significant collaboration and joint working. Significant liaison is occurring within partnerships and with outside organisations.
- There is general recognition by partners that their involvement has been worthwhile.

- Partnerships facilitate good coordination between individual members and member organisations and encourage members to think beyond their own responsibilities. They also enable information and best practice exchange through forums and other more informal groups.
- Community involvement within partnerships varies: for some towns it takes the form of consultation on individual projects and an annual public meeting; other partnerships are more proactive, encouraging community representation at the board level and funding community-led initiatives.

Obstacles to success

- Partnerships could work better if they were given more resources, including funding, staff, administrative assistance and coordinators.
- They would also welcome more support from agencies, including the Countryside Agency and local authorities. Support covers both resources given by the agencies and the attitudes they display.
- It is widely perceived that partnerships would improve if they achieved wider representation – particularly from the business community, young people and people living in the communities around the town (see ‘Engaging the hinterland’, below).

Engaging the hinterland

Many partnerships recognise that they could do more to encourage participation from people from the communities around their town, but it can be hard to achieve.

Some towns have established a hinterland working group to look specifically at this issue. Towns often invite parish councils to MTI meetings and encourage them to sit on the partnership; they also visit the hinterland and use newsletters and websites to disseminate information to a wider audience. Briefing sessions for local authorities at all levels, explaining the benefits of getting involved, have also helped to facilitate engagement.

While most market towns still provide a range of services to their hinterland communities, it is recognised that outlying communities will use different towns for different purposes. It is useful therefore to establish why people might visit the town and to identify ways in which hinterland communities that do not relate to the town at present might be actively engaged.

4. Strategic fit

Those who make and implement policy widely recognise the MTI as complementing many of their own policies and programmes. They also acknowledge the MTI's role in providing a unique 'bottom-up' perspective on the complexities of rural regeneration. And in many towns, the MTI acts as a focal point for a wide range of strategic partners, helping to deliver common aspirations for rural revitalisation and service provision.

Elements of success

- The use of partnership working, healthchecks and action plans has raised the profile of market town regeneration within the plans, programmes and strategies of partner organisations, as well as within their day-to-day activities.
- Many towns have formed close links with other regional policy initiatives and regeneration agencies, although in some towns there is more work still to be done.
- Involvement in the initiative allows communities to access a range of partners. And the raised profile of market towns means that they are now seen as central to rural revitalisation.
- With its strong community focus, the MTI fits within the objectives of many other regeneration programmes and organisations, by helping to deliver against wider community objectives. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are illustrative of this; close connections between the towns and with LSPs and other community strategy partnerships are now being established.
- The MTI fits closely alongside regional programmes. Towns have, for example, had success in obtaining funding through initiatives such as the Heritage Economic Regeneration scheme and Townscape Heritage Initiative, both of which require community involvement.
- Connections to the MTI are also being made in Regional Planning Guidance and Regional Spatial Strategies. The MTI is also seen as responding to other strategies such as the Regional Economic Strategy. Links between market towns and housing strategies are also being made, as well as with other initiatives such as Leader plus, the Single Regeneration Budget and Rural Regeneration Zone, especially where funds can be harnessed.
- Many links have been formed with funding partners, organisations involved in the partnership and with organisations who sit in MTI forums. Partnership members and officers often make the case for market towns within the organisations they represent and at other forums and other partnerships on which they sit.
- National agencies such as English Heritage, Sport England and the Housing Corporation see market town partnerships as strong bodies through which to deliver support or implement policy.
- Representatives from the RDAs consider that projects put forward by MTI towns are consistent with their aims and objectives.

Obstacles to success

- Those who do not regard the MTI as complementary referred to the number of single interest groups, overlap and duplication.
- There is a recognised need for market towns to be aware of the links to LSPs. Poor awareness of links to regional policy by the towns may be due to a lack of understanding which in turn reflects a lack of capacity to assimilate the bigger issues.

Key message

In addition to the extent to which the MTI fits within existing funding programmes, it also has the ability to influence the future shape and mix of the market town through closer working with national and regional organisations.

The Countryside Agency should provide advice as to how partnerships can strengthen the links with such organisations, as well as helping towns to understand the implications for them of regional and national initiatives (such as reform of the planning system and transport).

Case study – Wolverton Unlimited



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A number of market towns face major population growth and pressure for development, which can significantly alter the character of the town. Some MTI partnerships are working with the local planning authority and developers to make sure that the town benefits from the changes. However, other towns facing these pressures do not appear to be attempting to drive the changes to the same degree.

Wolverton was established in 1838 by the London and Birmingham Railway Company as the first Railway Town. It now sits adjacent to Milton Keynes, which has been identified by the Government as a Growth Area. The proposal will result in the development of 70,000 new homes in Milton Keynes, with provision for 2,000 homes within Wolverton.

For Wolverton this presents both problems and opportunities. Within Wolverton affordable housing is becoming a significant problem, with first-time buyers finding themselves priced out of the market. The new development will bring around 600 affordable homes to the town, but residents are concerned about where these might be situated and their style.

The town's partnership, 'Wolverton Unlimited' is a unique example of community engagement. Its key role will be to assess how to influence the strategic location of housing development.



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Wolverton has a rich Victorian and industrial heritage, including a canal and a railway station, and the partnership is working to ensure that any new development is in keeping with these assets, and with the town's existing character and 'sense of place'.

5. Funding

MTI towns have, in general, been successful in securing funding from a wide range of sources. However, they are concerned now about the future of funding, as funding regimes change and action plans mature.

Elements of success

- A significant amount of funding has been delivered through the MTI. The total amount of money gained varies widely (Craven Arms in Shropshire, a town of just 2,000 people, for example, has secured £8 million).
- The most significant sources of funding are local authorities, the Countryside Agency (both through the MTI and other Agency programmes) and the RDAs. Other sources include voluntary and charitable organisations, the Lottery and European funding, as well as the private sector and national organisations such as English Heritage.
- The funding has delivered a wide range of benefits for the towns and hinterlands, both for those who live there and those who visit.
- MTIs are generally well placed to access a wide range of funding opportunities, bidding for a variety of funds at the same time. The Initiative has also given towns access to funds for which they might not otherwise have been eligible.
- Funding success to date would appear to demonstrate that both MTI officers and partnership members possess the right skills and knowledge to deliver the action plan.
- In some towns, project officers have been able to call on the help of the local authority in preparing and managing funding. This allows them more time for community engagement, facilitation and coordination of initiatives. Others have not had access to such support.
- Where possible, the project officer's skills should reflect the level of funding they will be required to access, as well as the support that they are likely to be given by partners. In a town where there are major economic concerns, for example, then an officer with wide funding experience and

project management skills will be more appropriate than one with strengths in community engagement.

- Funding bids are more likely to succeed if clear objectives for the project have been defined and the partnership communicates on a regular basis with funding agencies.

Obstacles to success

- Where bids have been unsuccessful, it is often because of a lack of match funding or a poor strategic fit.
- Applying for funding is commonly considered to be complicated and resource intensive. Suggestions about how to improve procedures include: streamlining the application process; providing clearer guidance about how to apply, the timescales and what kind of project might be successful; quicker decision making; more flexibility in allowing funding to 'roll over' between financial years; and greater integration between applications and monitoring procedures.
- It can take longer than expected for funds to be confirmed. This means that towns sometimes miss out on funds that are time-restrictive. Similarly, when funds become available at short notice (for example towards the end of the financial year), towns are required to prepare bids in very short timescales.
- The future availability of funding is a matter of widespread concern, as towns anticipate the diminution of current funding regimes. MTI funding from the RDAs is winding down for many market towns, and there are moves to decentralise within some regions. Concerns are more acute in those towns in which economic issues have predominated and where significant funding has already been awarded. Towns that have received less funding, perhaps focussing on community and social concerns, view potential

reductions in funding with less alarm; this is true also of those partnerships that have set themselves up as sustainable bodies such as development trusts.

- The ability of town partnerships to access private sector funding is often limited to small-scale projects or support in kind (such as access to office space and computers). Yet as traditional sources of funding decline, towns will need to access more funding from the private sector. As commercial operators, businesses will need to be convinced of the benefits they might gain from projects.
- Some partnerships or individuals have unrealistic expectations about the funding that is available, how it can be used, and how long the process takes.
- Many funders focus on capital projects, rather than on those that are revenue based. This impacts on the extent to which community objectives – which by their very nature tend to require ongoing financial support – can be met.

Key message

As most funding streams are finite, towns should develop a succession strategy by focussing on developing networks and engaging with other partners, developers and authorities. These partners will help them to realise their more strategic aims.

And when developing projects, partnerships should aim to maximise their sustainability, by ensuring that they encompass economic, environmental and social objectives.

Case study: Craven Arms

The Craven Arms MTI works closely with South Shropshire District Council's Regeneration team. The District Council's officers handle funding applications and project implementation. This leaves the MTI officer with more time to work with community groups and to act as an enabler and facilitator of initiatives.

Craven Arms has benefited from significant funding, ranging from large-scale capital projects to smaller scale community grants through the Community Chest. The Market Town Officer estimates that around 1,900 people (out of a population of 2,000 in the town) have benefited directly or indirectly from the Community Chest.

Funding has also come through the private sector (in the form of environmental improvements) and through the use of Section 106 money. It is estimated that around half of the businesses in the town have had either advice or financial involvement in the MTI.



At Craven Arms, many projects have already been completed, such as this new skate park and sports area (above). Other more ambitious projects, such as the redevelopment of the town's auction yard (left), are underway and will be completed next year. The healthcheck revealed that this part of town was very much disliked by local people. The redevelopment work has attracted substantial funding of £6.5m.

6. Access to resources

On balance, project officers consider that they have good access to advice and skills from partner organisations, although a significant minority feel they could have been given more help.

Elements of success

- Project officers have built up strong links with public sector partners, through discussions about funding, provision of advice and other help in kind.
- Relations with other organisations are influenced by the project officer's negotiating and collaborating skills.
- The level of resources made available to project officers varies; opportunities to share facilities and staff with partner organisations, such as town and parish councils, local authorities and housing associations, should be explored further.
- All of the town partnerships saw the benefits of having a paid coordinator in post at the start, and of retaining them wherever possible.

Case study – Frodsham Forward

Frodsham Forward was established with funding from the Countryside Agency and Vale Royal Borough Council. Only nine months after approving its action plan, the partnership has successfully levered in £2.4 million, including £1.6 million from the North West Regional Development Agency, to fund a range of projects. The partnership attributes its fundraising success to the knowledge and experience of its project coordinator, who identified funding sources and applied and lobbied for funds.

The partnership has also been successful in identifying existing funding that was earmarked for the area and, where appropriate, ensuring that it was redirected to projects in the action plan. This has helped to secure small-scale, early win projects which provide examples of issues in the action plan being implemented.

- Volunteers can provide significant support to the partnership, and some funding bodies now recognise their contribution when considering project applications.

Obstacles to success

- A number of project officers consider that they had little access to support, especially at the outset of the MTI, and that responsibility to seek support had rested very much with them.
- Some project officers also said that partners, particularly the local authority, did not always recognise the significance of the MTI. New project officers coming into established partnerships sometimes found that relations between the partnership and the local authority were poor.
- Project officers were commonly concerned that they were not given sufficient administrative support, and that this impacts on their capacity to take on additional roles and responsibilities.
- When officers and members were asked what resources would make a significant difference, they said more financial support, staff, funding for projects, administrative support, access to specialist advice, longer timescales and less bureaucracy.

Key message

There is much to be gained for all parties from joint working and mutual support. Ideally, strong relations with partner organisations, particularly local authorities, should be established from the outset. The Countryside Agency has an important role to play in supporting the development of key relationships between stakeholders within towns.

7. Delivering the MTI

Although the MTI has faced significant challenges, it has had major successes in promoting community involvement and in acting as a catalyst for regeneration.

Elements of success

- Most project officers and partners recognise the MTI as a successful venture – promoting community involvement, helping to raise the profile of the town with agencies and partners, and attracting funding. It has also given towns the confidence they need to respond to future opportunities.
- Partnerships recognise the healthcheck as a widely accepted means by which to raise issues with other partners and agencies.
- The Initiative has given existing community groups a greater sense of direction. And through regional and local forums, groups can share best practice and experiences.
- Most towns consider that ‘quick wins’ are important in keeping the community engaged during the time that the healthcheck, action plan and project implementation are undertaken.

Obstacles to success

- Key challenges associated with the delivery of the MTI include the need to overcome apathy and ‘consultation fatigue’ in order to secure community involvement, economic issues, partnership working, and funding
- Difficulties include appointing and retaining a project coordinator; undertaking consultation; communication; managing personalities within the partnership; and involving young people and those from the hinterland.
- Issues such as affordable housing, economic decline and agricultural reform are considered to be difficult for the MTI to tackle; and the MTI appears to have had little success in supporting specific areas of the rural economy, such as farm diversification or helping to establish alternative markets.
- It can sometimes be easier for partnerships to focus on the detail, rather than the bigger picture.

Case study: Opportunity Bewdley

Opportunity Bewdley is an independent regeneration company established in the first instance to implement the MTI. It has encouraged partner organisations to coordinate initiatives and to address key issues facing the town, most notably the problems arising from flooding. In addition, Opportunity Bewdley operates a number of grant schemes; the Market Towns officer devotes a great deal of time to

operating these schemes, which can restrict her involvement in other issues that affect the town. Recently, however, the company has obtained funding for an administrative assistant, which will free up officer time.

Opportunity Bewdley has been able to influence emerging issues, including traffic and transport, in particular community transport. A study has also been commissioned into the town’s local identity, to determine the elements that are distinct to Bewdley. This will inform a project to increase visitor numbers and impact positively on sustainable regeneration of the town.



As well as operating a number of grant schemes, Opportunity Bewdley encourages partners to address key issues in the town – improving quality of life for local people and making Bewdley a more attractive place in which to work and live. Shown here are the town’s new ICT centre, community transport scheme and play area.

8. The future

There is widespread commitment to continue the work that the MTI has started. This is based on the shared vision, momentum, funding and strong links that have already been established. Nevertheless, there are real concerns about the future, especially once the Countryside Agency's direct involvement comes to an end next year.

Elements of success

- The MTI is generally considered to have been a good starting point for market town regeneration, and it is thought that the MTI concept will continue in future.
- Partnerships have a strong wish to continue, brought about by the realisation that towns can influence decisions and take a direct part in the process of regeneration. The development of strong links within the towns themselves and with other towns and partner organisations is also important in this regard.
- A number of individual towns already have succession strategies in place and have secured the funding they need to keep the project officer in post once MTI funding has ceased.
- Some towns are evolving as development trusts or other bodies independent of the local authority; such partnerships appear to be well placed to continue as they rely to a greater extent on community and volunteer support. Other partnerships that are not constituted as development trusts are actively considering this as a route for succession. In other instances, local authorities are looking at opportunities to continue the support they have been providing to date in an imaginative way. Other opportunities to support succession include the evolution of the partnership into an LSP or the development of closer ties with the town council.
- It is recognised that the work now needs to move forward, beyond the towns currently involved in the MTI. The approach for making this happen varies between regions. In some regions, existing forums will continue to provide ongoing support; in others, the RDA is taking on the lead role.

Obstacles to success

- Continued financial support is the key issue in terms of the MTI's future, especially given the short-term nature of existing funding support.
- There is a feeling that it can be difficult to draw up a succession strategy as the objectives of potential funding or supporting bodies can be subject to so much change.
- Following the Haskins Review, the Countryside Agency is being refocussed and it will become a much smaller, watchdog organisation, with its role taken over by a range of other organisations (including the RDAs and Government Offices). Some people suggest that this will mean that no single organisation is championing the cause for market towns in future. The reallocation of responsibilities to the regions, and further uncertainty about regional devolution, is also creating concern.

Key message

Planning for the long term – that is, the future of the partnership beyond the MTI – should be undertaken early in its establishment as this may influence its structure and constitution. The Countryside Agency has a role to play in providing advice and support to partnerships about how they might continue once core funded has ceased.

Case study: A succession strategy for Malton/Norton Market Towns Partnership

Knowing that the MTI was due to end in March 2004, the Malton/Norton Market Towns Partnership wanted to make sure that they could continue to serve local communities once MTI funding had come to an end.

The Partnership looked into setting itself up as a Development Trust, but found that for a single town alone, with a limited number of projects, this was simply not sustainable financially or administratively. They then had the idea of getting together with three other market towns in Ryedale District to form a district-wide Development Trust. The resulting Development Trust, the Ryedale Economic Trust, will shortly come into being.

The Trust will be a not for profit company limited by guarantee, with board members from the private sector. The aim is to appoint a project officer who would serve all four towns and make progress in delivering projects that meet economic aims, drawing on a wide range of public sector funds. It is envisaged that the Trust will be able to take on significant developments, such as setting up business start-up units or developing brownfield land as a business/industrial park.

The Malton/Norton Market Towns Partnership will continue in a more advisory/consultative role. The Partnership has broad membership and already plays a key part in representing local people, for example by commenting on the Local Development Framework and the Regional Spatial Strategy.

By repositioning itself in this way, the Market Towns Partnership has developed from a vehicle to deliver projects in the town, to acting in a more strategic and consultative way, hence ensuring greater likelihood that it will be sustainable in the long term.



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9. Conclusions

In many market towns across England, the MTI has acted as a catalyst, drawing together disparate groups and activities, and providing the tools to engage the local community and a wide range of partners. It has created a sense of identity, helping to instil a feeling of pride and sense of purpose within the community. And it has demonstrated that communities within the towns have the skills and resources available to influence their regeneration, future role and identity.

The research found that a high percentage of those involved in the MTI, either as members of the partnerships, or as officers, have found it worthwhile as a means by which the profile of their town has been raised.

Partnership working defines much of the MTI activity, and while it is not without its stresses (for example, the difficulties associated with ensuring that the partnership is representative), the approach is widely welcomed.

Many towns have focussed on bringing about change within their town through smaller scale projects – such as enhancement schemes, and community grants and events – that improve the quality of life for residents and visitors. A significant number of

towns have taken the MTI a stage further, using it as the vehicle by which to influence the programmes and strategies of other organisations. It is this wider role that will, it is hoped, be the lasting impact of the MTI, whereby local communities can take their place at the table alongside a whole range of other partners and organisations.

The lessons learned

When asked what advice they would give a town that is about to embark on the MTI, officers and members put forward the following suggestions:

- form relationships with other partners, agencies and the community, gain their commitment and focus on maintaining good communication with them;
- put key skills in place – this particularly applied to members who saw the value of a good project officer;
- get the partnership right in terms of its quality, representation and structure;
- consult the community and get them involved; and
- learn from the experience of other market towns, for example through networks such as Action for Market Towns.

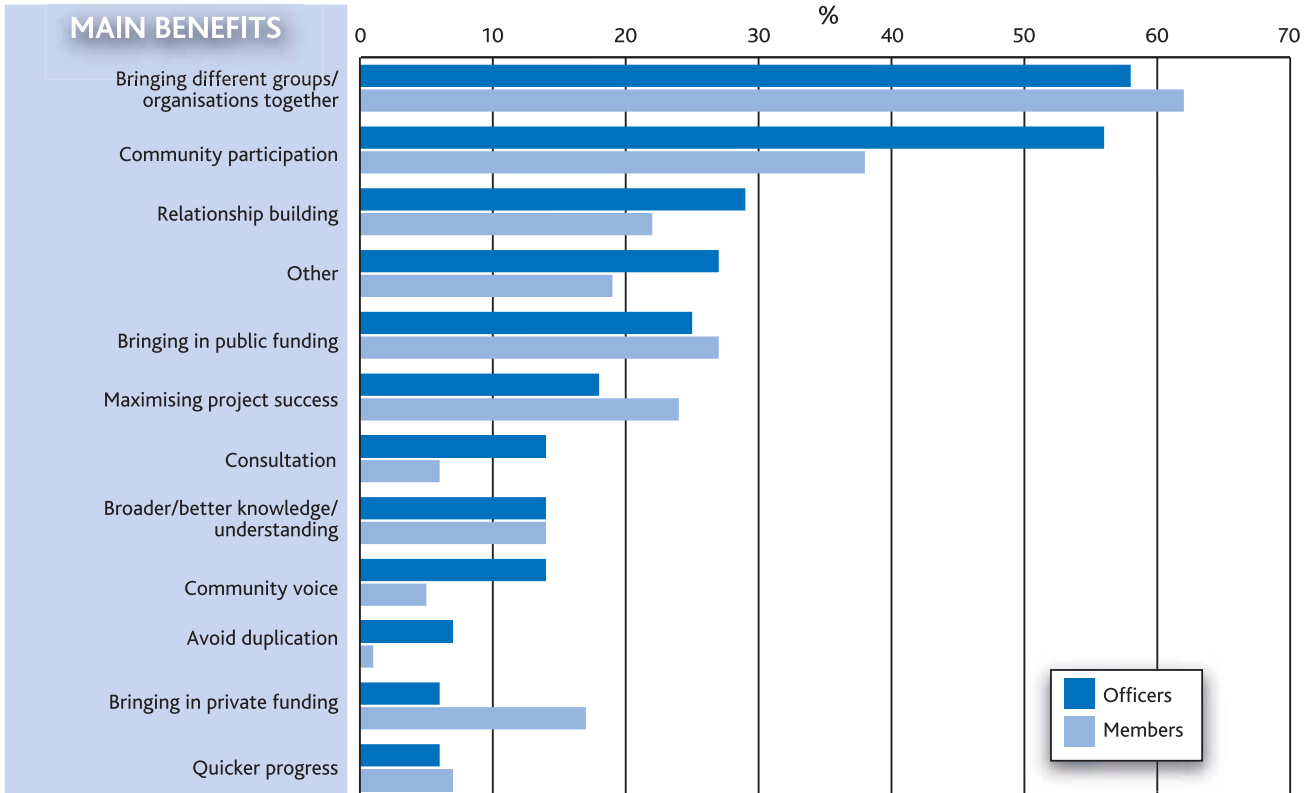
The case study towns suggested that the key lessons they had learned include:

- the importance of managing and limiting expectations of the MTI; and
- the need to deal with and manage the views of disparate groups.

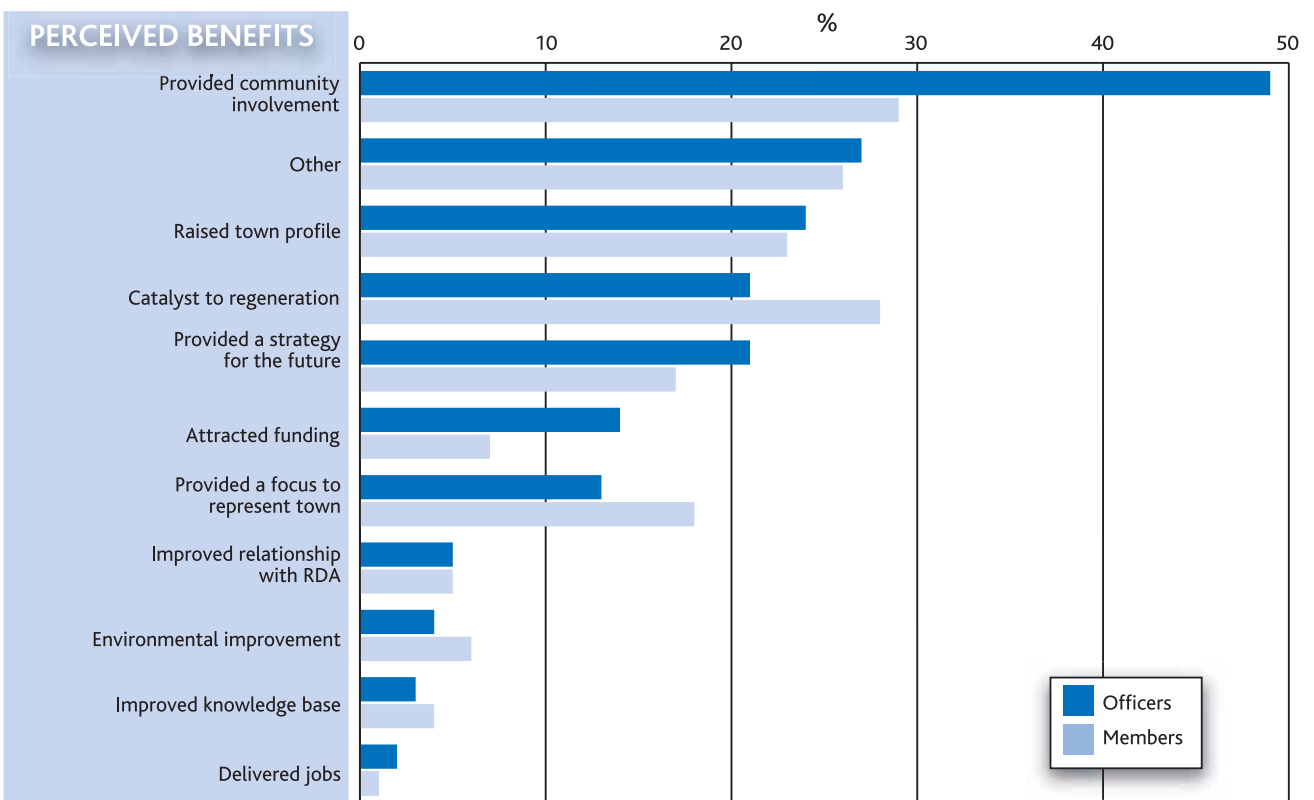
Undoubtedly, the most important lesson learned has been that there exists within the market towns the skills, experience and commitment of local people to take a lead in the regeneration of a town and to contribute to the development of policy. This is being translated into thinking on succession, where there appears to be a consensus that a key individual needs to drive the market towns partnership forward.

Appendix 1: Statistical information

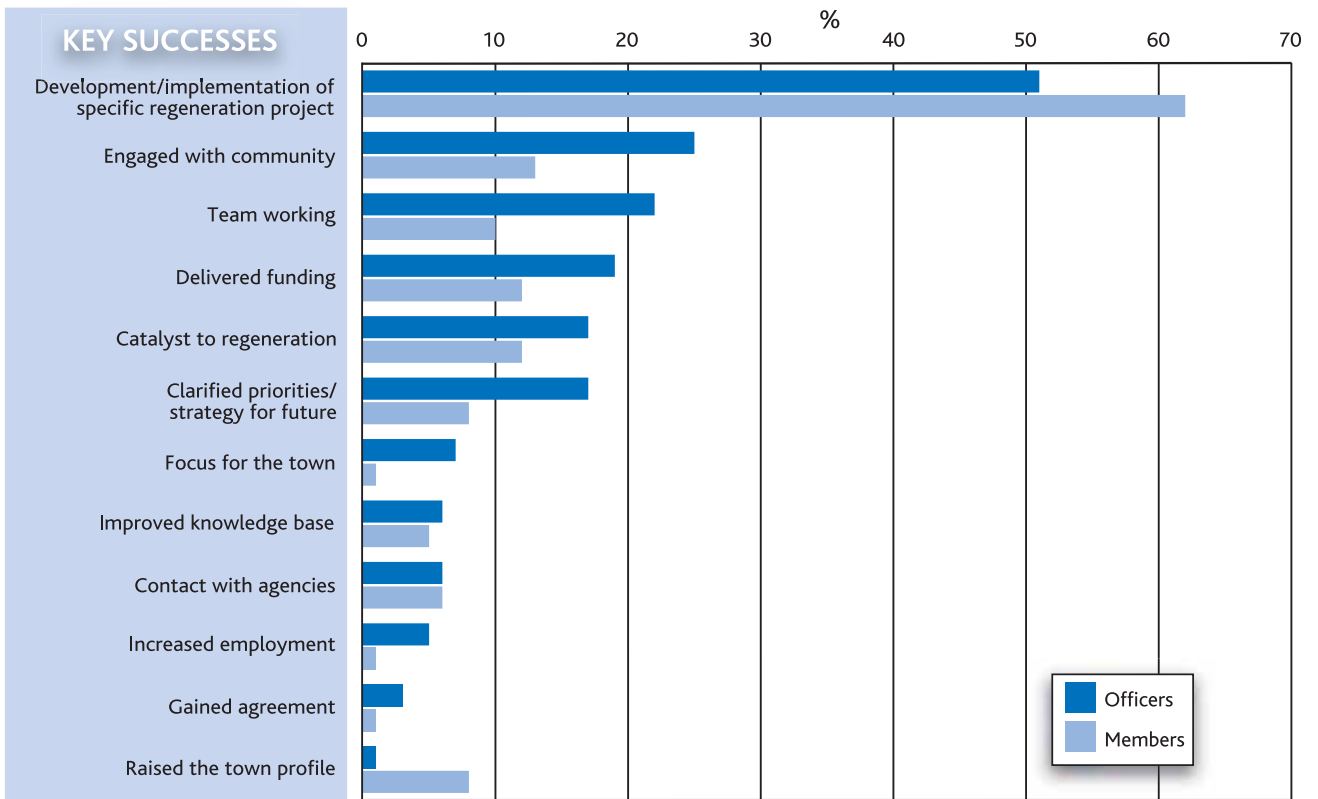
Key benefits of a partnership approach



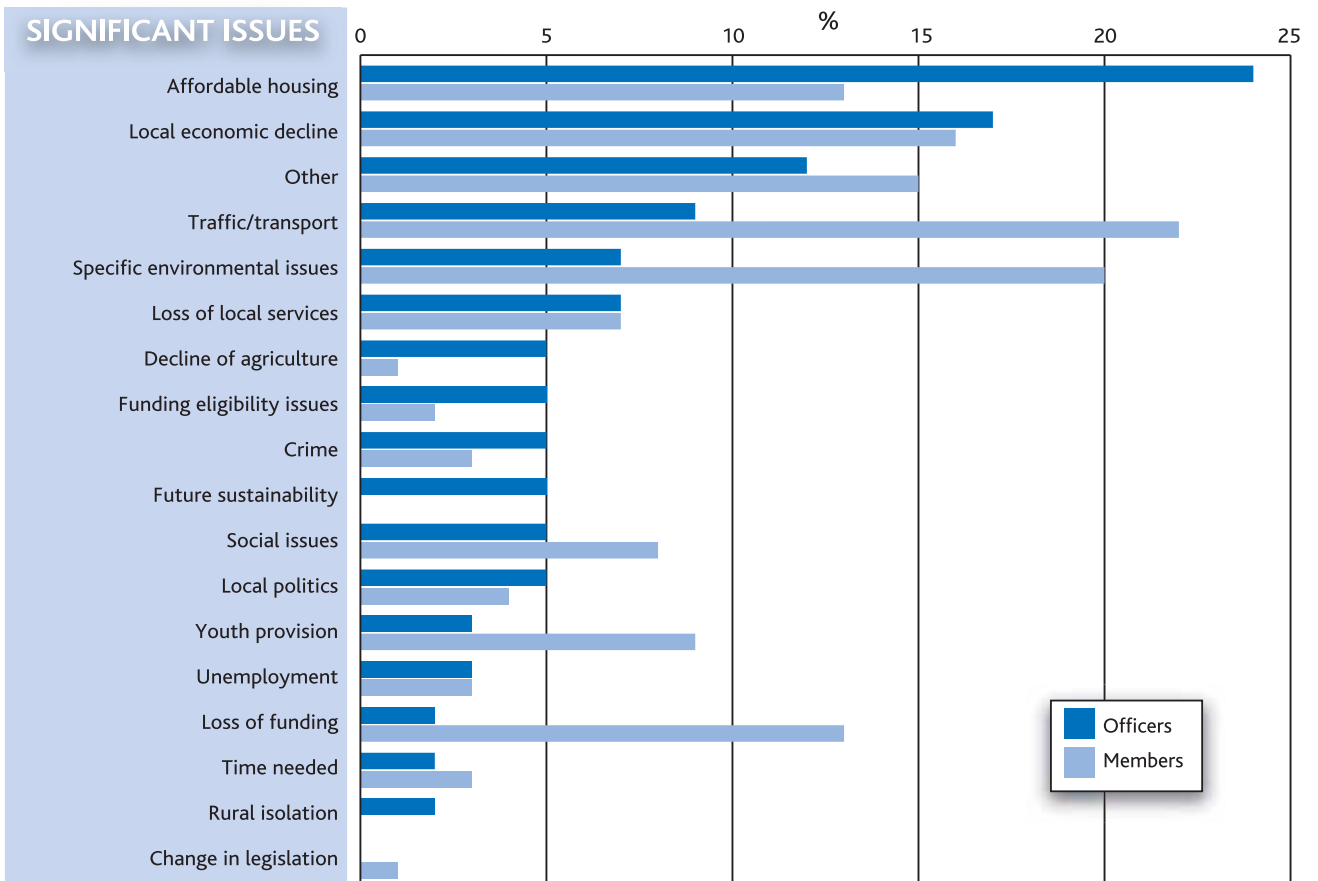
Key benefits of MTI participation



Key successes



Significant issues not addressed



Reasons given by partnerships for wishing to continue beyond the life of the MTI

Reason given	Number of mentions
Strong vision and commitment from the community (and partnership)	48
Other funding is available	41
Momentum gathered and the need to fulfil community expectations	36
Involved in other relevant organisations, eg LSPs, Councils	25
Constituted to raise funding	19
Strong, pro-active partnership	12
Was doing this activity before the MTI	11
Tied to longer term programmes/Masterplan/LT issues	10
"Hope so"/"It has to"	10
Got/getting funding in place to continue	8
Have an exit strategy in place	6
MTI funding was just the catalyst	4

Issues that partnerships consider might hinder success beyond the life of the MTI

Reason given	Number of mentions
Lack of funding/awareness of other funding	31
Don't know	9
Apathy	6
Weak/poor/split partnership/lack of leadership	4
Need for a central facilitator	3
Lack of volunteer time	3
Made/makes no difference	3
Local politics	2
Poor experience in the past	2