

Promoting the vitality and viability of Louth

Simon Quin and Dr Chloe Steadman

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About the Institute of Place Management

The Institute of Place Management is the professional body for people involved in making, maintaining and marketing places. As part of Manchester Metropolitan University, the Institute of Place Management is dedicated to supporting people who serve places, providing them with unbiased research, continuing professional development, qualifications, conferences, events and networking opportunities.

Authors

This report has been written by an interdisciplinary team of academics and practitioners from the Institute of Place Management.

Simon Quin

Simon is Co-Chair of the Institute and a Visiting Professor at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has some 30 years' experience of working with town centres as a practitioner and researcher and works closely with policy makers at all levels.

Dr Chloe Steadman

Chloe is a Research Associate at the Institute of Place Management and a Lecturer in Marketing at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her doctorate from the University of Manchester is in consumer research.

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Foreword

This report has been prepared following a workshop held in Louth on 27th June 2019. The workshop was facilitated by the Institute of Place Management at the invitation of East Lindsey District Council.

Approximately 45 local stakeholders representing a variety of different bodies and interests in and concerned with Louth were present at the workshop. It was run over three hours and led by Simon Quin and Dr Chloe Steadman.

Table of Contents

Background and context	1
The changing high street	1
How should centres respond?.....	3
Total participant results	4
Table 1: Factors impacting Louth’s vitality and viability	4
Figure 1: Louth’s vitality and viability driver	6
Results by group.....	6
Table 2: Positive factors for Louth	6
Table 3: Negative factors for Louth	6
25 factors for town centre vitality and viability	6
Table 4: High Street UK 2020 25 priority factors impacting vitality and viability	7
Table 5: Collective SWOT analysis results	9
Going forward	9
Priority 1 – Restructuring.....	10
Priority 2 – Repositioning	10
Priority 3 – Rebranding.....	15
Priority 4 – Reinventing	15
Conclusion	16
References.....	17

Background and context

Town and city centres have always changed, and historic centres such as Louth show a clear legacy of that. They have responded to trends, innovation and the changing consumer at local, national and global levels. Over the last 40 years, town centres have faced the challenge of retail and other services moving first out of town and then online. Whilst many town centres, including Louth, have adapted and survived, a report earlier this year from the House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which had spent six months hearing evidence about the challenges town and city centres face, said:

“Unless [this] urgent action is taken, we fear that further deterioration, loss of visitors and dereliction may lead to some high streets and town centres disappearing altogether.” ([Parliament 2019 Page 3](#)).

Such concerns triggered a response by national government, leading to the announcement of a series of new measures in the October Budget of 2018, including:

- Business rate relief for small retailers,
- New initiatives to encourage community use of vacant retail units,
- A review of the planning system relating to town centre uses,
- A new High Street Fund with £675 million to support challenged town centres,
- The establishment of a Task Force to operate at a national level and support town and city centres.

Driving this response were recommendations from an Expert Panel established by the Minister for the High Street and led by Sir John Timpson. The Institute of Place Management supported the Panel by holding workshops in six locations across the country to hear at first hand the opinions, challenges and aspirations that town and city centre users of all kinds felt. Alongside [The High Street Report](#) from the Panel, the government also published a report from the Institute on [High Street 2030: Achieving Change](#). Both these reports were published in December 2018.

The government response, the newspaper headlines and the findings of the recent reports all illustrate the severity of the challenge facing town and city centres. Louth is not alone in thinking it needs to take action to revitalise or reinvent its centre, but in doing so, it is important to take into account the scale of change that is happening.

The changing high street

The workshop opened with a review of key changes affecting town and city centres. Over the last 40 years, we have seen the growth and spread of out of town shopping. Research by the Institute has found that town centres could lose up to 30% of footfall to out of town centres. In 1994, just 14% of retail development was happening in town centres, leading to tighter planning policies requiring a ‘town centres first’ approach. This did not stop out of town development and town centres continued to see their share of retail expenditure decline. In 2000, this was just under 50%, having fallen from around 75% in the 1970s. In 2018, the Centre for Retail Research estimated the town centre share as 36.6% and projected a further fall to 34% by 2022.

Although more than four million square metres of out of town retail space was built in the decade to 2011, another driver of falling spend in town centres is now online shopping. In 2018, according to the Office for National Statistics, it accounted for 18% of retail spend. This masks the fact that food retailing online is only 6.5% whilst non-food is 26.5% (CRR 2018), while some sectors are

considerably above this. The decline in town centre spend is mirrored in footfall. Over the last 10 years, total footfall in town and city centres has dropped 20% (Springboard 2018/19). While some town and city centres have performed very differently to this overall trend, in general fewer people are now visiting town and city centres. The loss of spend and visitors is part of the reason why we are now seeing the closure of many big name retail brands, not only on high streets, but now also in retail parks.

There are other factors to consider, including competition, lack of investment, over-expansion, and how having an online presence reduces the number of branches a store may require to achieve national coverage. Multiples once needed 250 stores to establish a national presence, but now they can trade with around 70 stores with online support. Again, there are exceptions to this, but multiple retailers going into administration or announcing store closures have seen over 26,000 units close over the last decade (CRR 2019). Not all these stores cease to be retail, with evidence new operators take some on, and others become sub-divided, though data from the Centre for Retail Research suggests store numbers across the UK will reduce by over one hundred thousand (over 25%) in the decade 2012-2022. This gloomy picture, however, masks the conversion of many stores to non-retail use, such as coffee shops. Nevertheless, these changes are having a significant impact on retail employment. The British Retail Consortium forecasts 900,000 retail jobs will be lost by 2025, with 164,000 forecast to go in 2019 alone.

The focus on retail, however, overlooks how many other services traditionally found in town and city centres are also contracting. Nearly 3,000 bank branches have closed in the last four years and over 7,500 estate agents are under threat. Travel agencies are closing, and even insurance offices, with Swinton closing 40% of their branches. According to *Which? Magazine*, cash machines are also disappearing, with 3,000 going in the last six months of 2018.

The scale of change is beginning to impact on retail property values. Recent advice from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors suggests we can no longer rely on past valuations. With the sale of shopping centres significantly below previous values (some to local authorities), and some property owners taking bold steps to mark down, new opportunities are arising to rethink the function of town and city centres.

We are also seeing opportunities from technological changes. The growth in electric vehicles will do much to improve air quality in town and city centres, with forecasts that 30 million will be on the road by 2030. Renault Nissan will launch 10 different electric cars this year and claims 84% of buses will be electric by 2030. We are also seeing the development of autonomous vehicles, with expectations, 50% of vehicles will be highly autonomous by 2030. Research by the University of Toronto suggests this will increase car-parking capacity in urban areas by 62%. Data also shows that young people are not driving as much as in the past. The Department of Transport shows that in all age bands under 40, there are fewer people with driving licences now than in the 1990s. Research from the Universities of Oxford and Bristol found a 40% decline in 18-24 year old car drivers now compared to the 1990s. Technology is also allowing new transport options in cities. Apps such as *Whim* offer seamless travel by a range of modes within urban areas and they will become more commonplace as many cities ban cars from their centres. Forecasts suggest that one car in ten sold in 2030 will be a shared vehicle, perhaps across many households. Together, these forecasts suggest declining demand for road transport infrastructure and parking.

Technological changes will also affect retail. Currently people make about two thirds of their online purchases on a mobile device, but, with the rise of the Internet of Things and AI, an increasing proportion of the goods we order will become subject to automatic payment and delivery.

Predictions suggest 3-D printing will produce 5% of all consumer goods by 2030, and so high streets may become micro-manufacturing hubs. Robotics will also alter retail, raising the possibility of 24-hour store operation. Already evident in fulfilment centres, shops and stores will introduce this over the next few years. By 2030, therefore, our retail experience will be very different.

As town and city centres change, they also have to address wider changes in society. Overall, the population of the UK is growing, but it is also ageing. The number of people aged over 85 will double by 2041, whilst those over 65s will increase by more than a third. Town and city centres can have a vital role in providing for the needs of an ageing society, not just through residential provision, but also with activities, health and educational facilities and opportunities.

Retail is already responding. New stores are opening that just loan and share things, rather than sell them. Norwich has just become the first Sharing City in the UK. Retailers will know far more about us through our data, enabling greater personalisation. This happens already online, but a growing number of retailers are introducing personal customisation in-store. We are also seeing demand for variety, which could through pop-ups, encompassing everything from market stalls, to temporary shop units, events space for use for entertainment, health, education and other community-focused activities. The centre might be very different every time you visit. Retailers are also adding value. In a growing number of stores, you can now do courses: learn how to bake, to sew, to knit, to mix cocktails etc. Stores are also offering other experiences, from pastries to home-brewed beer to virtual reality. In some larger cities, we are now witnessing the conversion of retail units into showrooms for particular brands, stores where customers might examine a product before buying it online. There is a lot still to happen, but retail is changing.

How should centres respond?

In the face of these challenges, what should be done? How do we make a town centre sustainable, a place people want to be, a place where business can thrive? We first need to understand what we are trying to do.

In 1994, the government commissioned the publication of *Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge* (HMSO, 1994). This led to changes in national planning policy, which introduced the town centres first concept. The report defined vitality and viability in respect of town centres. They are both concerned with life: the first (vitality) being about whether a centre feels lively and the second (viability) whether a centre has the capacity to attract the investment needed, not only to maintain the fabric of the place, but also to allow for adaptation to changing circumstances.

As part of the workshop we asked participants to *individually* identify three factors which have the biggest impact on the vitality and viability of Louth, whether positive or negative. Participants were then split into 6 groups of 5-10 people to discuss their ideas and *collaboratively* arrive at a consensus over the top 3 factors impacting Louth. These ideas were recorded on flipchart paper and then presented back to the whole workshop.

The findings from this activity have subsequently been linked to the IPM's 25 Factors, as identified in the HSUK2020 project, and which are detailed below. Table 1 and Figure 1 show the individual participant responses and the findings from the group discussions are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

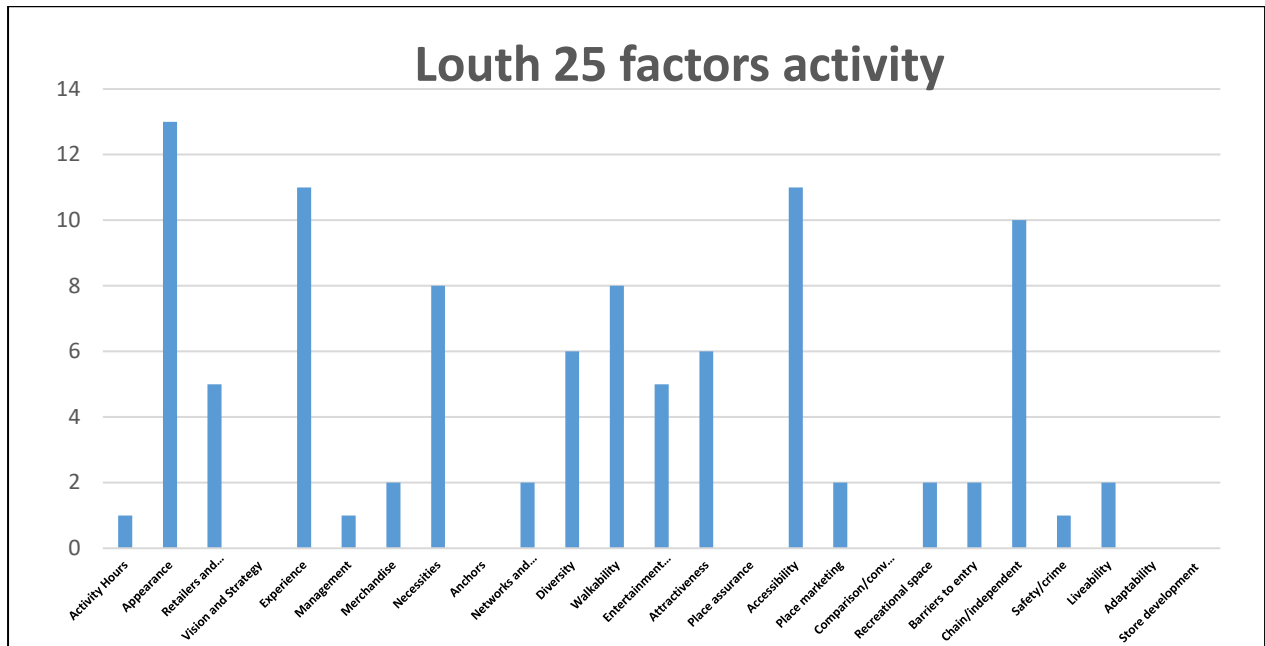
Total participant results

Table 1: Factors impacting Louth’s vitality and viability

25 factors	Specific references	Frequency (n=98)
Activity hours	“closed shops”	1
Appearance	“state of town centre” (2) “weeds everywhere” “visual impact” “attractive Georgian buildings” “street cleanliness” (3) “pleasant environment” “attractive (historic) environment” (2) “pleasant attractive centre” “attractive townscape”	13
Retailers and services	“charity shops” “ageing family businesses” “quality food shops” “unique mix of shops” “supermarkets”	5
Experience	“social shop talk” “pedestrianisation needed” “accommodating” “overzealous parking wardens” (2) “attractive ambience” “independents’ personal service” “vibrant market” (2) “experience” “hostile car environment”	11
Management	“lack of single voice for change”	1
Merchandise	“wide range of quality offers” “value offer”	2
Necessities	“parking issues” (2) “on-street disabled parking” “free car parking” “parking cost and availability” (4)	8
Networks and partnerships	“interactivity” “retailer apathy”	2
Diversity	“uniqueness” “variety of retail offer” (3) “limited retailer clothing offer” “appeals to different age groups”	6
Walkability	“small- accessible by foot” “traffic mixing with pedestrians” “pedestrianism” “compact area” (2) “narrow paths and cars in centre” “walkable” “cars still dominant in streetscape”	8
Entertainment & Leisure	“music/arts/entertainment” “musical events”	5

	<p>“programme of arts and culture”</p> <p>“arts and entertainment events”</p> <p>“good coffee and leisure”</p>	
Attractiveness	<p>“attractive to tourists”</p> <p>“encouraging tourism”</p> <p>“character”</p> <p>“attractive”</p> <p>“heritage assets”</p> <p>“preserved historic character”</p>	6
Accessibility	<p>“transport from local villages”</p> <p>“parking and access issues” (3)</p> <p>“transport and parking issues”</p> <p>“public transport issues” (2)</p> <p>“location”</p> <p>“lack of public transport”</p> <p>“far away from quite a lot”</p> <p>“accessibility issues”</p>	11
Place marketing	<p>“individuality”</p> <p>“awareness”</p>	2
Recreational space	<p>“poor public realm”</p> <p>“leisure and activity spaces”</p>	2
Barriers to entry	<p>“rents and business rates”</p> <p>“rents prohibitive”</p>	2
Chain vs independent	<p>“variety of independent retailers” (4)</p> <p>“staying loyal to local businesses”</p> <p>“retention of independent stores”</p> <p>“lack of national brands”</p> <p>“not attractive to multiple retailers”</p> <p>“high-end independent food”</p> <p>“unique not mass produced retail”</p>	10
Safety/crime	<p>“security shutters”</p>	1
Liveability	<p>“leakage [of people] to larger towns”</p> <p>“growing housing development”</p>	2

Figure 1: Louth’s vitality and viability driver



Results by group

Table 2: Positive factors for Louth

Theme	Specific references	25 factors
Multi-functionality	“Attractive ambience” “Arts, entertainment, events” “Leisure and activity spaces” “Events and community spirit” “Variety of shops and services”	Entertainment & Leisure Experience Diversity
Independents scene	“Independents and heritage” “Independents and community feel”	Chain vs independent Retailers

Table 3: Negative factors for Louth

Theme	Specific references	25 factors
Accessibility	“Transport and parking” “Parking and access” “Car environment and walkability” “Car parking issues”	Accessibility Necessities Walkability
Appearance	“Aesthetics and appearance”	Appearance

25 factors for town centre vitality and viability

In 2014, as part of an ESRC-supported HSUK2020 project, the IPM undertook a comprehensive literature review to identify factors contributing to centre vitality and viability (see Parker *et al.*, 2017). The review produced some 160 factors which formed a point of discussion with multiple stakeholders in the ten UK town centres who were partners in the project. The process identified additional factors, which we could link to published academic research, but it also revealed some

new factors, yet to be studied by academics. In total, the study identified 201 factors that impact on town centre vitality and viability. However, as they stood they had no sense of priority or importance. Therefore, 22 leading town centre experts drawn from practitioners and researchers were asked to rank them using two scales: how much a factor impacted on town centre vitality and viability, and how much local control could be exercised over a factor. This then led to the ‘Top 25 Factors’ impacting vitality and viability, detailed below and used to summarise the exercise above.

Table 4: High Street UK 2020 25 priority factors impacting vitality and viability

1. ACTIVITY HOURS	Ensuring the centre is open when the catchment needs it. What are the shopping hours? Is there an evening economy? Do the activity hours of the centre match the needs of the catchment?
2. APPEARANCE	Improving the quality of the visual appearance. How clean is the centre?
3. RETAILERS	Offering the right type and quantity of retailers. What retailers are represented?
4. VISION & STRATEGY	Having a common vision and some leadership. Do stakeholders collaborate? Is the vision incorporated in local plans?
5. EXPERIENCE	Considering the quality of the experience? Measuring levels of service quality and visitor satisfaction. What is the image of the centre?
6. MANAGEMENT	Building capacity to get things done. Is there effective management – of the shopping centre(s) and town centre?
7. MERCHANDISE	Meeting the needs of the catchment. What is the range and quality of goods on offer?
8. NECESSITIES	Ensuring basic facilities are present and maintained. Is there appropriate car-parking; amenities; general facilities, like places to sit down and toilets etc.?
9. ANCHORS	The presence of an anchor which drives footfall. This could be retail (like a department store) or could be a busy transport interchange or large employer.
10. NETWORKS & PARTNERSHIPS	Presence of strong networks and effective formal or informal partnerships. Do stakeholders communicate and trust each other? Can the council facilitate action (not just lead it?)
11. DIVERSITY	A multi-functional centre. What attractions are there, apart from retail? What is the tenant mix and tenant variety?
12. WALKABILITY	The ‘walkability’ of the centre. Are linked trips between areas possible – or are the distances too great? Are there other obstacles that stop people walking?
13. ENTERTAINMENT & LEISURE	An entertainment and leisure offer. What is it? Is it attractive to various segments of the catchment?
14. ATTRACTIVENESS	The ‘pulling power’ of a centre. Can it attract people from a distance?
15. PLACE ASSURANCE	Getting the basics right. Does the centre offer a basic level of customer service, is this consistent? Or do some operators, or parts of the offer, let this down?

16. ACCESSIBLE	Ease of reach. How convenient is the centre to access? Is it accessible by a number of different means, e.g. car, public transport, cycling etc.?
17. PLACE MARKETING	Communicating the offer. How does the centre market and promote itself? Do all stakeholders communicate a consistent image? How well does the centre orientate visitors and encourage flow – with signage and guides etc.
18. COMPARISON/CONVENIENCE	The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience. Is this sustainable?
19. RECREATIONAL SPACE	The amount and quality of recreational areas and public space/open space. Are there places that are uncommodified? Where people can enjoy spending time without spending money?
20. BARRIERS TO ENTRY	Refers to obstacles that make it difficult for interested retailers to enter the centre's market. What is the location doing to make it easier for new businesses to enter?
21. CHAIN VS INDEPENDENT	Number of multiples stores and independent stores in the retail mix of a centre/High Street. Is this suitably balanced?
22. SAFETY/CRIME	A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting. Perceptions of crime are usually higher than actual crime rates. Does the centre monitor these and how does it communicate results to stakeholders?
23. LIVEABILITY	The resident population or potential for residential in the centre. Does the centre offer the services/environment that residents need? Doctors, schools etc.
24. ADAPTABILITY	The flexibility of the space/property in a centre. Are there inflexible and outdated units that are unlikely to be re-let or re-purposed?
25. STORE DEVELOPMENT	The willingness for retailers/property owners to develop their stores. Are they willing to coordinate/cooperate in updating activities? Or do they act independently?

Our research suggests that all 25 factors have an impact on the vitality and viability of a town centre. The participant contributions identify positive aspects in relation to many of these but also negative ones. Using the information above, a useful starting point to identify priority actions and help develop a strategy for the future is to undertake an audit of the town centre against the factors. This should look at each of the factors and make an assessment based on evidence available. Those factors that give cause for concern or where there is under-performance should be the ones to receive priority attention.

You can read more about the IPM’s HSUK2020 project on the IPM blog [here](#), or alternatively in the Journal of Place Management and Development’s open access special issue [here](#).

For further insight into Louth, we asked participants in the workshop to work in groups of 5-10 people to discuss and arrive at a team consensus around the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats impacting Louth. This task encouraged participants to think about the wider structural issues impacting Louth, both in the present and also looking into the future. Ideas were recorded onto flipchart paper and presented back to the whole workshop group for discussion. Collective results from this activity are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Collective SWOT analysis results

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good range of independents - Heritage and history - Good range of events and festivals - Vibrant markets - Compact centre - Community passion - Attractive town 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accessibility and parking issues - Dominance of cars - Council perceived as being resistant to change (stakeholder tensions) - General appearance issues - Ageing and low income population - Lack of employment opportunities
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making Louth the ‘Food Town’ - Public realm improvements - Spending power of older population - Improve and expand the markets - Local housing growth - Enhancing the night-time economy 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online shopping growth - The youth drain - Rising cost of bricks and mortar retail and putting on events - Loss of essential services - Tensions with the council - More multiples entering Louth

It is reassuring that the SWOT analysis picked up on many of the positive and negative factors relating to vitality and viability. The diversity of retail, the heritage and attractiveness of the town are positives, whilst accessibility and appearance are issues that need addressing.

We explained in the workshop that the 25 factors can be allocated or further classified across another framework that has been much used by towns. This is the 4As.

- Attractions are the reasons people come to a centre, and those attending the workshop felt that the independent retail offer was strong, but concerns were raised about the night time economy, employment, and attractions serving young and old people.
- Accessibility is getting into, out of and around the centre, servicing and providing for people with various needs. There appears a high level of concern about this from the responses, both in terms of access to the town and the pedestrian/vehicle balance within it.
- Amenity is the quality of experience within the centre and there were several references to appearance and experience, both positive and negative.
- Action is about making things happen and it was clear from the discussions that there are issues about leadership, engagement, management and place marketing.

This short exercise and analysis may not represent the totality of the views in Louth. Younger people may have very different perspectives and there will be other views held. It is important though that it represents the views of a group of diverse stakeholders from beyond the public sector and that there was a fair degree of alignment across the room. There are some excellent strengths of the town but also clearly challenges to address. So what happens now? What should Louth look to do and how will it happen?

Going forward

Although Louth is an attractive town and is performing well, with low levels of retail vacancy when compared with regional and national figures, the workshop identified a number of shared concerns and issues about its future and also highlighted some current concerns, particularly related to accessibility and experience. As detailed above, the general outlook for town centres is that they will experience significant change in the years ahead. The snapshot from the workshop is that Louth

should review in more detail the 25 factors listed above and see how the town is performing in respect of each. This will identify areas for action.

The Institute has developed a four element framework for regeneration that enables full attention to be given to areas of need. The four areas where a difference can be made are repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring.

Priority 1 – Restructuring

Restructuring has two aspects. It is first about governance, how a centre is led and managed, how visions are developed and how communities are involved in place. As we go forward, governance needs to be relatively more sensitive, and multi-faceted, to respond to the complex and contested changes occurring at the level of high streets and town centres. Understood in this way, *restructuring* comprises and serves to facilitate, elements of high street resilience. It is also about physical restructuring and infrastructure (Peel and Parker, 2017).

The Institute involvement in Louth was through an initiative from East Lindsey District Council and they are also the lead on a bid for funding to establish a High Street Heritage Action Zone. Whilst this is welcome, we are concerned that unlike most towns now, there appears to be no active town centre partnership. Across the UK, there are close to 300 town and city centres where a Business Improvement District is now in operation, bringing investment from the local business community to enhance the public realm, support business development, and undertaken marketing and promotion (see www.thebidfoundation.com for more information. BIDs are usually supported by the local authority and they work alongside one another. Many have community involvement as a critical part of their activity. However, establishing a BID takes time. In locations where there is no existing partnership, this can often be two years to a successful ballot. Whilst in the long run, a BID may be useful to Louth, we feel that the town would benefit from more immediate management to address some of the issues identified in the workshop and help develop a more sustainable town centre. Towns across the UK have more informal partnerships that support a town centre manager who has a responsibility for the town. Forming a town centre partnership which would build on the stakeholder involvement in the workshop and which could identify priorities for wider action than just the Heritage Action Zone initiative but at the same time support that, would be a useful step.

Many of the accessibility issues identified in the workshop also fall under restructuring. They can be difficult, costly, and contentious to address and the value needs to be shown. In some towns, trials or temporary initiatives have been used to assess the desirability and practicality of schemes. It may also be possible to make minor changes that have a benefit, such as making car parking pay on exit to encourage longer dwell times.

Priority 2 – Repositioning

Repositioning is a strategy that relates to clearly identifying and communicating a place's market position (Millington and Ntounis, 2017). It can be used to counteract decline, and enables centres to identify potential competitive advantages. The starting point is understanding forces of change, and the value of unique responses that reposition centres. Such responses should build on a place's distinct capabilities, whilst also being accommodative of future trends in order for a centre to be resilient. Knowledge exchange between stakeholders is also crucial in such strategies to generate a shared understanding of a centre's identity and function.

Many centres have made mistakes with repositioning. They have sought to change based on the experience of other locations that are sometimes not suitable or inappropriate. Our research has

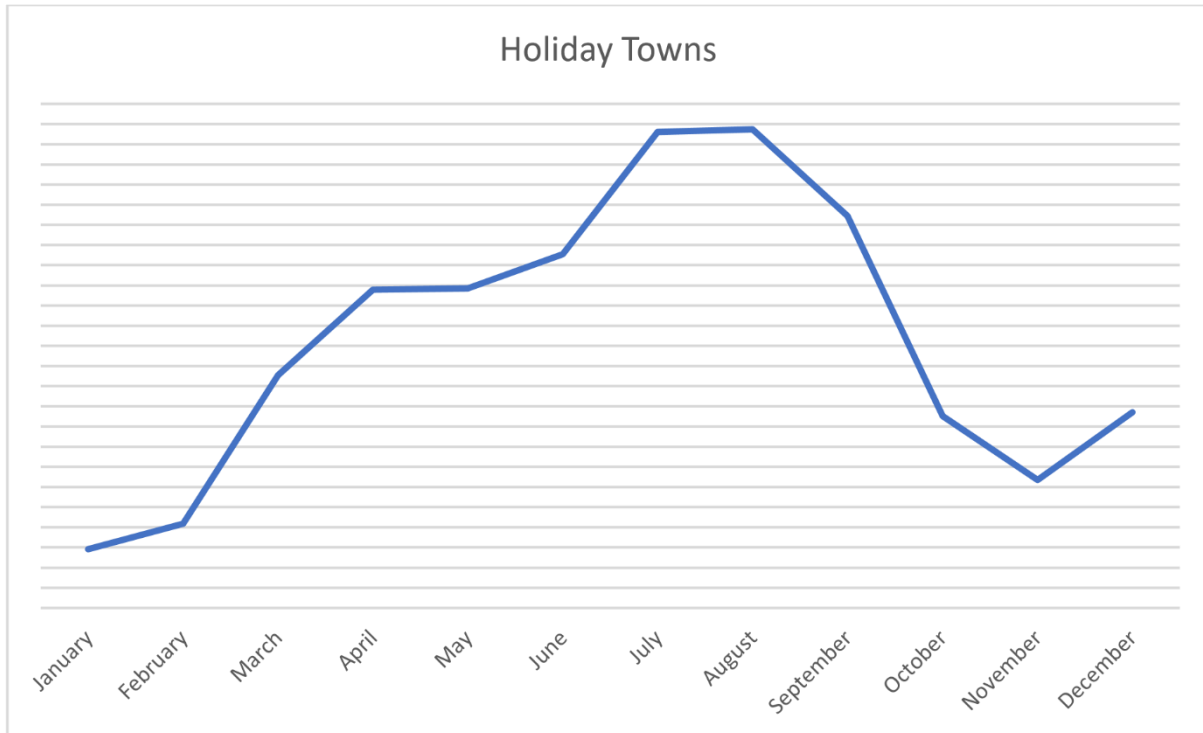
identified the value of evidence to inform decisions about the future of a centre. We have analysed footfall data from nearly two hundred locations over a number of years and this has shown that town centres are already used in different ways with significant implications for the type of initiative that should be undertaken.

From the footfall data provided by Springboard, we have identified four town types: Comparison, Speciality, Holiday, and Multifunctional. The classification is based on differences in usage across the year.



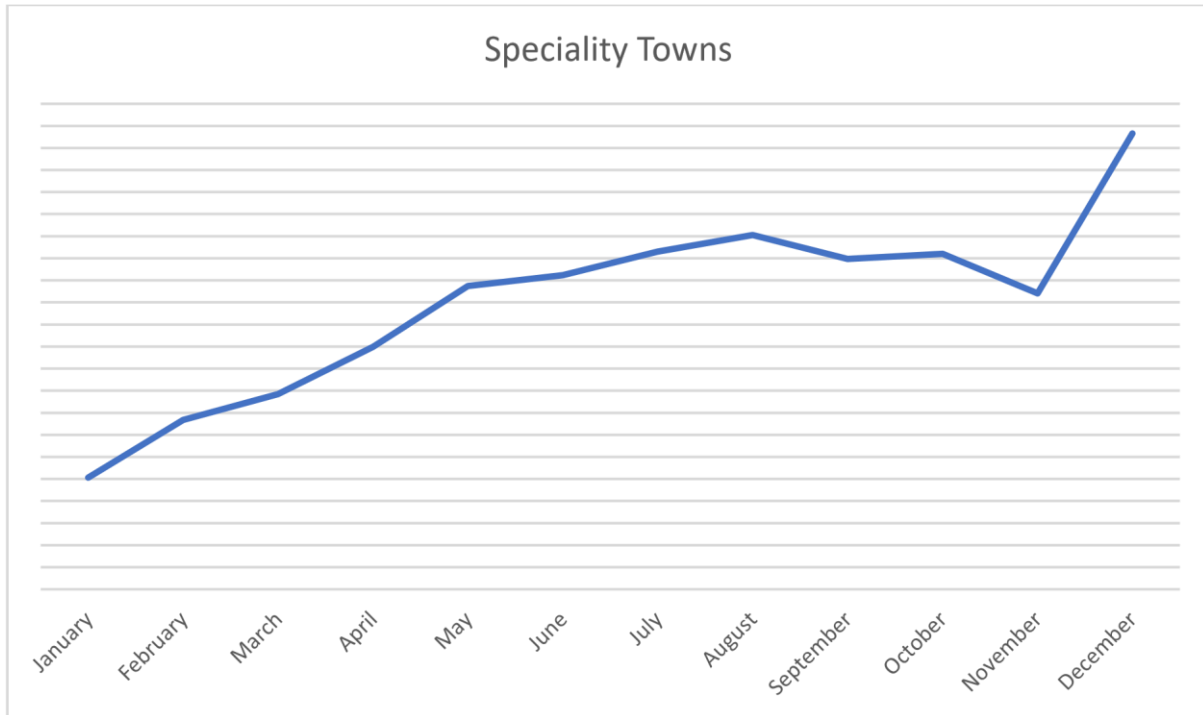
Comparison shopping towns: these are centres that display the expected Christmas shopping peak (see chart above). They are typically, but not exclusively, larger centres that have a strong and diverse retail offer. Here you will typically find a range of department stores, major variety stores and a solid line-up of fashion and other comparison retailing. They draw people from a wide catchment area, though visits may be relatively infrequent. As such they need to be accessible by a choice of means of transport with good links to the region they serve. These centres compete with other similar centres and with other retail channels, such as out-of-town and the internet.

Our analysis shows that, over a 10 year period, many towns have lost their comparison signature –as they have lost comparison retail from their centre. However, comparison retailing needs space so the opportunity for ex-comparison towns is to reuse this space to strengthen one of the other functions; speciality, holiday or multifunctional (convenience/community).



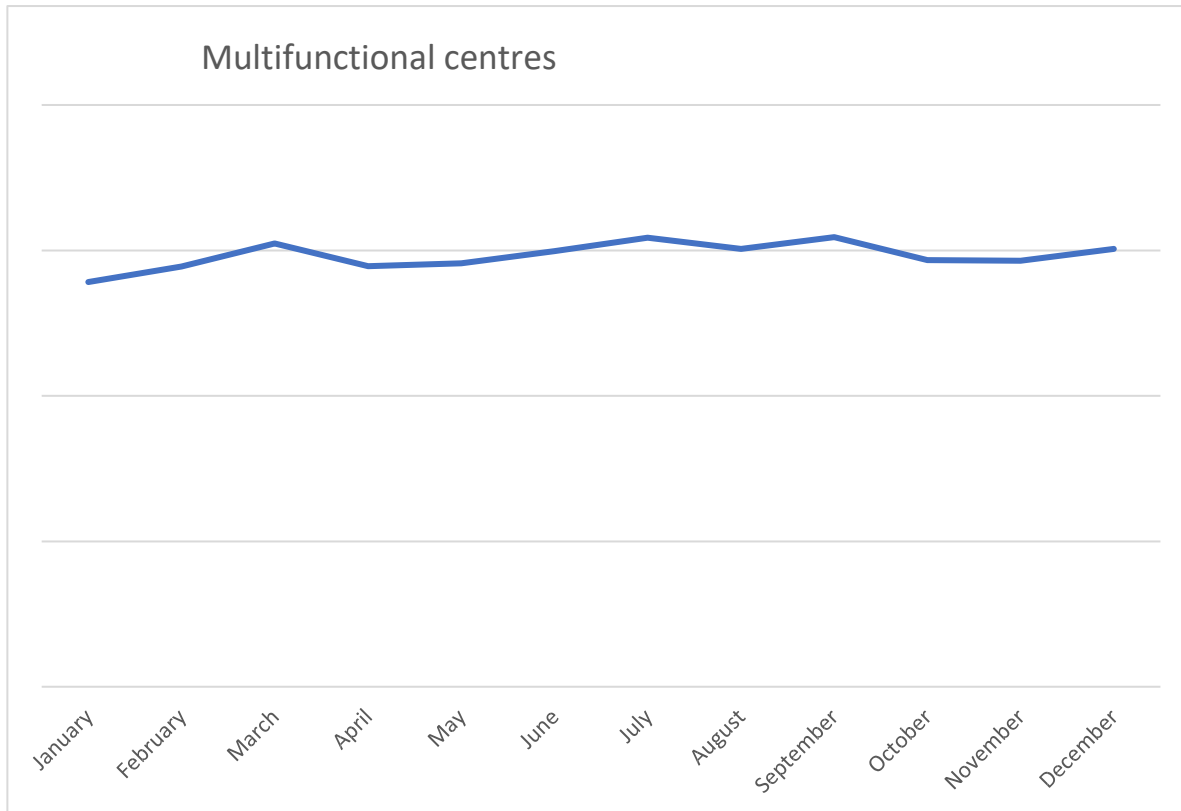
Holiday towns: in these towns the peak pedestrian flow is in the summer months (see chart above). Typically coastal resorts, this pattern is also found in some inland places with strong visitor appeal. Their anchor is usually not retail but perhaps a natural feature like a beach or the countryside. The retail offer in the town is very much geared towards tourists and does not serve the local community very well, as reflected in the lack of use out of season. These centres need to maximise trade in the peak months, through extended opening hours and increased trading areas, but in the future, they need to look at extending the visitor season and providing more for local communities.

Our analysis shows that although there are fewer holiday towns than any other type, their function is very stable. It takes a significant time to build a reputation as a holiday town, therefore it is likely that this a fairly resilient function to have.



Speciality towns: these combine features of both the first two types (see chart above). They have a notable Christmas shopping peak, but they also attract visitors through the spring and summer. They offer something unique and special that appeals to visitors from a wide area, in many cases including overseas visitors. Their anchor is not retail but perhaps a distinctive cathedral, museum, city walls or unique quarter. It would appear that people spend longer on their visits to these centres and this may be supported by a strong retail and leisure/hospitality offer. This means these centres do also provide well for their local communities. They need to focus on how they maintain their speciality or make themselves more special, more distinctive whilst still meet the needs of their catchment.

Because speciality towns attract a significant amount of visitors (likely to mainly be day trippers) the current catchment and shopper population estimates for these towns are severely underestimated.



Multifunctional centres: the largest group of centres identified by usage have a fairly steady profile through the year (see chart above). Analysis of this type has revealed that these centres are focused on their local community. Their anchor might be food retailing, employment, access to public transport, or a strong resident base. They are places that offer a convenient mix of goods and services. Centres with a low to medium volume of footfall through the year need to think about how they are locally connected and focus efforts on improving convenience for people in the immediate area. This may be through ensuring trading hours meet local needs, through introducing new offers such as parcel collection from retail units or lockers, pop-up retailers and restaurants, regular markets which bring in new product lines and services on an occasional basis, home-working and small business facilities, a very strong customer service approach focused on maintaining customer loyalty, or other things that enhance convenience and respond to community need. Centres with a higher annual footfall may be quite large and have a strong retail offer but they have steady footfall flows because they are multifunctional centres. Their employment base, hospitality offer, culture and entertainment, strong service offer such as universities or hospitals, and central housing, all ensure that footfall remains steady through the year. They also need to think about connectivity, but perhaps at a regional level, and about ensuring they can support the range of activities that take place in the centre.

Understanding what type of town you are is a basic first step in determining how best to go forward. It also ensures that decisions you make are rational and hence have a better chance of success. At present there is no footfall information for Louth and therefore we are not able to say what kind of town Louth is. We would recommend that this is an early step in repositioning as it will provide objective data to make decisions for the future.

Priority 3 – Rebranding

Strategies of rebranding focus upon the application of branding, marketing communications, and public relations techniques in order to deliver a consistent place identity, which relates to the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions in the minds of potential consumers of a place (Ntounis, and Kavaratzis, 2017). Successful place brand management can lead to positive word-of-mouth, and assist in the transformation of previously negative, or just as problematic, non-existent images.

In preparation for and post the workshop, the Institute representatives asked multiple friends, relatives and colleagues from other parts of the UK what they knew of Louth. Somewhat remarkably, quite a number thought it was in Scotland, but the vast majority had no impression at all. Having been and seen what the town has to offer, its historic character, its strength as a town centre, its wonderful location and distinct retail offer, we think Louth should be more well known. We think visitors would enjoy spending time in the town and would spend money. We go to many places that think they are special or distinctive and many of them are not. Louth, we believe, has the potential to make that claim and not disappoint. Whilst it faces the challenge of accessibility, there are other small towns that have overcome this problem and now attract regular visitors. Your independent shopping offer could in itself be an attractive concept that would draw visitors even before they experience the wider town. We are not advocating that Louth should be overrun by tourists, but we do think the town deserves to be visited and a modest increase would be of benefit.

Part of the rebranding though is not marketing outside the town but addressing what the workshop picked up in the general appearance not matching the historic character. If a local partnership and management structure is put in place, then a key priority would be to make the town appear more welcoming through planting, banners, signs, maps, reliable directional signs, apps, shop window displays, pop-ups, entertainment and events, and other communication that would both welcome and share the rich diversity of the town. As discussed at the workshop, Louth could be visually much more appealing. This may offer opportunities for greater involvement by young people.

Priority 4 – Reinventing

The SWOT analysis rightly identified the historic character of Louth and the strength of its diversified retail offer. These are things that judging by the comments from the participants are highly regarded locally. The initiative of East Lindsey District Council to bid for High Street Heritage Action Zone funding would further enhance this appeal. As noted above, what is not clear is the extent to which this is more widely known. Although adjacent to the Lincolnshire coast and the Lincolnshire Wolds, we did not get the impression that tourist numbers were significant. It may be that more research is needed on the wants and needs of those who use the town, offering an enhanced experience to both local and visitor markets. As Louth expands with new housing, understanding and balancing needs of new residents will also be critical as will the adjustment to cater to an ageing population.

Reinventing strategies relate to the activities undertaken to revitalise a place's identity and offer (Theodoridis, Ntounis, and Pal, 2017). Any place, however, should understand and seek to meet the needs of its catchment and the visitors it may attract, and be sensitive to these insights when making any changes within a centre. Once available, we would encourage stakeholders in the area to make use of the footfall data being recorded to track progress of any interventions and to monitor change using other data. This data can be an invaluable resource, particularly for local businesses when considering aspects such as opening hours which can be important for centres looking at extending dwell time of visitors.

Conclusion

We would like to thank East Lindsey District Council for the invitation and express our gratitude to all the participants who gave up over 3 hours of their time to contribute. The noise level during the group sessions indicated the enthusiasm with which they participated and we believe this augurs well for a wide ranging response.

Louth is a fascinating town with an interesting history. It still has a wonderful built environment, that we hope is enhanced as a result of the recent funding bid. It is more fortunate than most in that it has a strong retail offer still with an excellent range of independent shops and the presence of major banks still with branches. The market is clearly also an important feature. The workshop heard about the role of arts, culture and entertainment in the town. There is clearly a strong base but there were recognised issues and problems. Although the relative isolation of the town has perhaps meant it has not felt the full force of economic, technological or societal changes that have impacted many other centres, we do not believe that Louth can think it is exempt. It would be prudent to introduce changes now so that change is better understood and monitored, so that some basic things can be addressed and evidence-based plans made for the future. We think this should build on the workshop and the sense of community we experienced in Louth to ensure it is a place that best serves the needs of its residents and users and is appreciated by all its community members and those lucky enough to visit.

To summarise what we say above, we think you should look at governance and management for the town centre, you should build evidence on how it is performing by gathering footfall and other data, you should look to put the town on the map by reaching out more widely, improve the welcome, experience and visual appearance of the town, and keep under review how best to meet the needs of the growing catchment and incoming visitors.

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