

Promoting the vitality and viability of Alford

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November 2019



Placemanagement.org

About the Institute of Place Management

The Institute of Place Management is the international professional body and learned society that supports people who serve places. As part of Manchester Metropolitan University, we provide unbiased research, continuing professional development, qualifications, conferences, events and networking opportunities. The Institute has published extensive peer-reviewed research on town centres and works daily with policy makers and practitioners involved in supporting their vitality and viability.

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Foreword

This report has been prepared by the Institute of Place Management following workshops held in five towns across East Lindsey: Louth, Alford, Horncastle, Mablethorpe and Spilsby. These workshops were attended by nearly 200 local people: residents, community group representatives, business owners, and members of various councils. Each workshop examined the changes now facing the high street, the challenges that lie ahead and explored with participants different aspects of the respective towns.

The Institute would like to thank all who attended the workshops for their active contributions and to thank East Lindsey Council for organising the sessions.

The report provides a general overview of the issues covered in the workshops and draws on research undertaken by the Institute and others to explore the outlook for town centres. In the sections on the individual towns (Louth was the subject of an earlier report) we look in more detail at the discussions in each session and at options for the future.

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Background and context

The volume of news about the decline or even death of the high street has grown in recent years. The media is full of stories about retailers and banks closing, about towns being left behind, about growing levels of retail vacancy, and the growth of online retailing. We are seeing changes in consumer behaviour that are profoundly impacting our towns and as we look to the future we have to consider potential economic and environmental impacts from the climate emergency as well as from technology developments. What does this mean for town centres? Will they still exist, how must they change?

East Lindsey's inland market towns have a rich historic legacy and are located close to wonderful countryside with easy access to the Lincolnshire coast where Mablethorpe provides access to a stunning beach. The relative isolation of the towns, no train lines reach this far, and their scale, means that the boast on the sign in Spilsby's marketplace that the town is little changed from the early 19th century, whilst not entirely accurate, has distinct echoes in each of the inland towns. Heritage, history and strong sense of community were identified as strengths in each of the workshops.

These are not towns that became dominated by large numbers of multiple retailers, though there are some. However, retail vacancy is evident in each town and several businesses we spoke with evidenced that retail is suffering in the centres. Other external factors such as the closure of banks, are also impacting on East Lindsey's towns and the loss of services was evident in each of them. There are many factors that are responsible for the look and performance of towns, ranging from global to local and responses on the ground as well as at a national level are important as towns change.

East Lindsey's Local Plan was adopted in 2018 and has positive things to say about its towns. It states (Paragraph 24 Page 20) that:

"They provide a range of higher order district-wide services and facilities that because of economies of scale cannot, reasonably be expected in other settlements. These should mainly include

- a range of convenience shopping;
- further education and vocational training facilities;
- secondary education facilities;
- a choice of managed recreational and sporting facilities;
- access to public transport;
- a defined retail catchment area;
- a defined employment zone with opportunities for inward investment;
- a range of health and community facilities;
- a fire station and permanent police station;
- a permanent library;
- accessibility to green infrastructure"

Whilst the local commitment is important, there are many things outside the control of a local authority that are impacting on towns. We believe that to ensure towns serve the needs of their communities it is just as important to understand the changing national context and the impact it is having on high streets and their future sustainability.

A report published earlier this year by the House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which had spent six months hearing evidence about the challenges to our town and city centres, 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).

The evidence submitted to the Committee had already been discussed with Government and this led to a series of initiatives to support towns 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 (this was increased to £1 billion in 2019),
- The establishment of a Task Force to operate at a national level and support town and city centres.

Over the Summer, the Government revealed that the previously announced Stronger Towns Fund would now be part of a Towns Fund that would also include the Future High Streets Fund and in total make £3.6 billion available for towns, though not all would be focused on town centres. Some of this funding would be available to towns through a bidding process and some would be targeted at specific towns, though a business case still had to be made to release the expenditure. Skegness and Mablethorpe were two of the 100 towns eligible to submit proposals for potentially £25 million of funding to support transformative change.

The funding for town centres was strongly advocated by a report from an Expert Panel established by the Minister for the High Street and led by Sir John Timpson. During 2018, 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 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. We welcome the fact that this has been recognised by East Lindsey and we had chance to share this background with many community members. As you now look to take action to revitalise or reinvent your centres, it is important to take into account the scale of change that is happening and to plan for the future rather than today.

The evolving role of town centres

We tend to think of town centres as similar. We recognise there are large and small ones but evidence gathered by the Institute of Place Management and Cardiff University has shown that there are four types of town centres in the UK based on how they are used (Mumford et al 2017). We have termed these Comparison centre, Holiday town, Speciality town and Multifunctional centre. These have different footfall patterns through the year as shown in *Figure 1* below. The percentage figures shown on each town type equate to the number of towns of that type in the UK based on locations from where data is gathered.

Comparison centres have a strong retail offer, a wide range of retail choice, are anchored by department and variety stores, draw on a large catchment area and so need to be accessible by a choice of means of transport. They are places people go for Christmas shopping. They are normally larger centres but some relatively isolated mid-sized centres have this profile as well. They compete with other comparison centres and online shopping and the quality and range of retail is important. This remains an important focus for them.

Holiday towns have their footfall peak in summer. They draw people from a wide area. They are not exclusively on the coast, there are inland towns with this profile. Out of season they do not draw many visitors and are not places for Christmas shopping. Their anchor might be a beach or theme park, they are all about fun and entertainment in the peak season. These centres are not serving their local communities very well but they could look at extending their season at each end and maximising returns during their busy periods by extending trading hours.

Speciality centres see footfall rise through the spring and summer as well as attracting Christmas shoppers. They have a good retail offer but the key reason for visiting is often the historic fabric of the place, a major attraction or something else distinctive and special. They have to balance the management of visitors with providing a quality retail offer and need to promote their distinct identity and positioning.

Multifunctional centres make up the largest group of town centres now. Many former Comparison centres have now become multifunctional as retail dominance has been replaced by other uses. There are large and small multifunctional centres with different footfall volumes but with the same pattern as illustrated on the chart. The larger ones generate footfall through employment uses in their centre, through universities, hospitals and other public offices, through large-scale culture and entertainment centres and increasingly through housing. The smaller ones are much more about regular convenience shopping and local services. Footfall is steady through the year and they have to think about service quality, convenience, reliability and encouraging linked trips.

Understanding what type of town you are, means you focus on doing the right things for your town. Actually knowing what type of town, depends on having a minimum of two years footfall data to avoid rogue data, but often people trading in the town will have a good insight when they compare the town types.

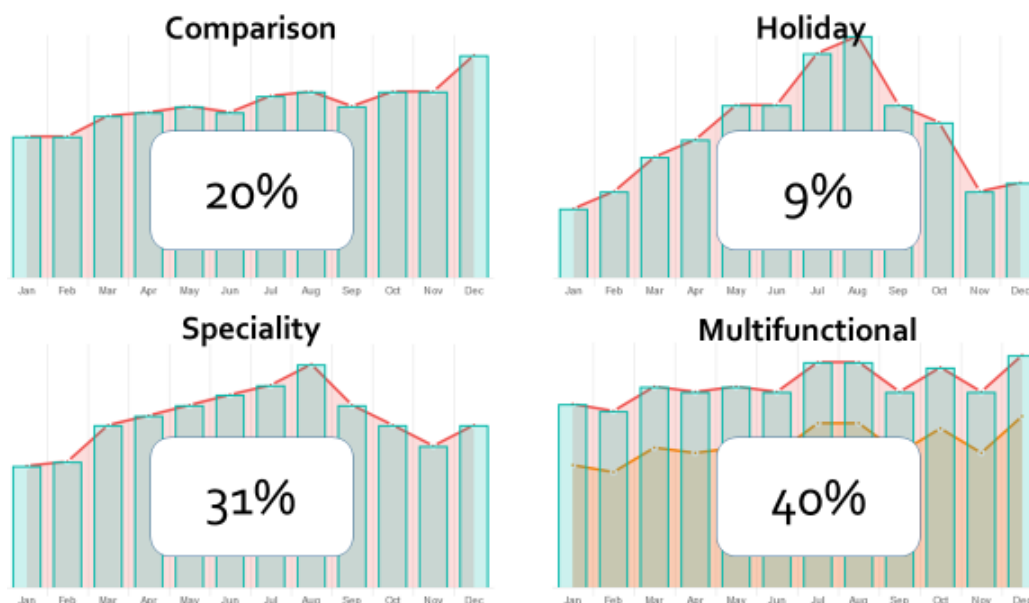


Figure 1: Britain's town types

The changing high street

Each 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 within 10 miles of major out of town retailing lost on average 30% of their footfall, and some considerably more. In 1994, just 14% of retail development was happening in town centres, leading to tighter planning policies requiring a ‘town centres first’ approach (Planning Policy Guidance Note 6). 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.

Online retail sales share 2018

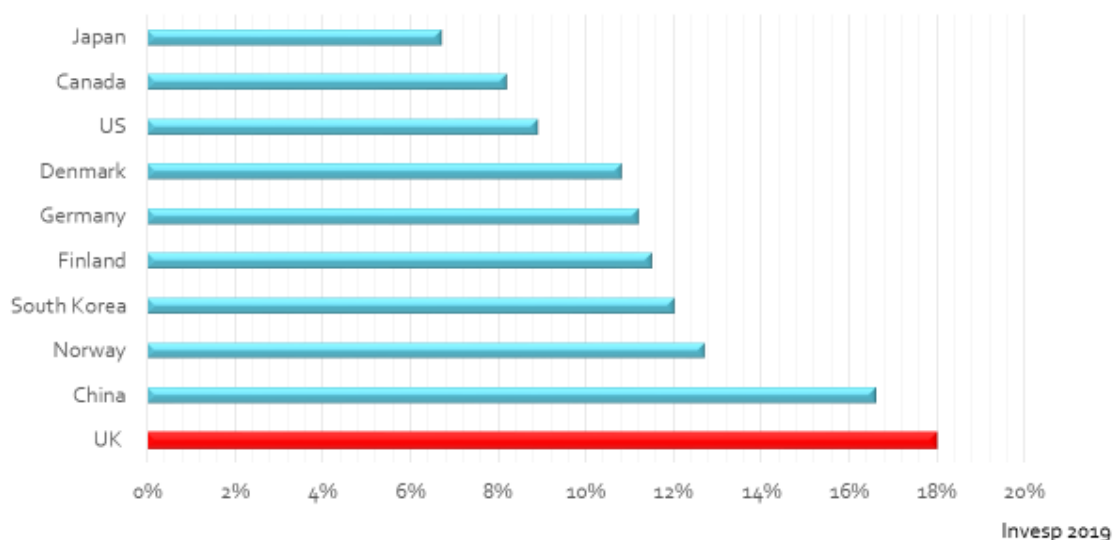
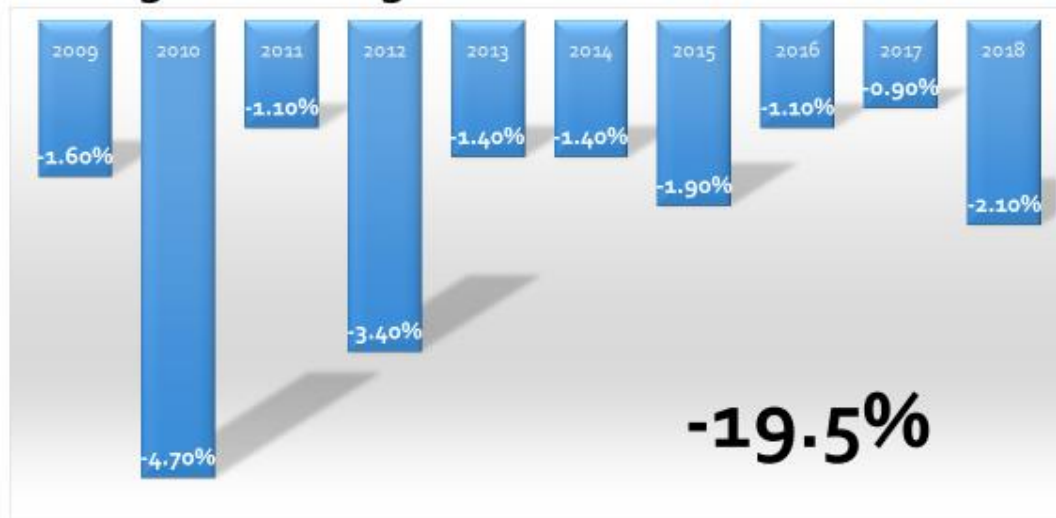


Figure 2: Share of online sales by country

Although more than four million square metres of out of town retail space was built in the decade to 2011 across the UK, 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), and some sectors are considerably above this. A higher percentage of retail sales happen online in the UK than in any other country as shown in *Figure 2* above.

The decline in town centre spend is mirrored in footfall. Over the last 10 years, as shown in *Figure 3* total footfall in town and city centres has dropped almost 20% (Springboard 2018/19) across the country. Whilst 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.

Change in UK high street footfall



Springboard 2019

Figure 3: Decline of high street footfall

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 certainly calls into question whether past projections of growing retail demand for town centres is still valid. East Lindsey's 2018 Local Plan, using data from 2014, suggests demand for additional retail space in Louth, Horncastle and Alford, we would suggest this is treated with caution given changes in the last few years.

This gloomy picture, however, masks the conversion of many stores to non-retail use, such as coffee shops or personal services. New research from *Which?* identifies growth in tattoo parlours, hair and nail bars, as well as function rooms in town centres since 2014 (*Which?* 2019). 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 150,000 jobs lost last year and 164,000 forecast to go in 2019 alone (CRR 2019).

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 80% 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 having 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 that 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. 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 impact retail. Our online purchasing is already changing, with a dramatic rise in mobile shopping rather than shopping online from home or work. Retailers such as Schuh and Asos have seen spending on mobiles quadruple to close to 80% share of online purchases. 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, hence changing the nature of shopping significantly. Also impacting on retailing is the growth of social media influencers. Some of these have millions, in some cases tens of millions, of followers and their endorsements can be very significant, but there are many more micro-influencers but still with thousands of followers. They too are impacting on the development of retailing.

Predictions suggest 3-D printing will produce 5% of all consumer goods by 2030, and so high streets may become micro-manufacturing hubs. This will reduce the number of delivery vehicles servicing town centres. 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. ONS forecasts for East Lindsey see the population rising by 9,000 (6.5%) between 2016 and 2041, which is significantly slower growth than England as a whole. The number of people aged over 85 in the UK as a whole will double by 2041 (and East Lindsey is forecast to see a rise of 91%), whilst those over 65s will increase by more than a third (37% increase is forecast for East Lindsey). Town 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, wellness and educational facilities and opportunities.

Retail is already responding. New stores are opening that just loan and share things, rather than sell them. Norwich is taking this further and has just become the first Sharing City in the UK, whilst John Lewis is piloting a buy-back scheme on fashion. We are seeing new demand from these retailers.

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 and many researchers suggest a vibrant, though probably smaller, retail scene will be retained in most centres.

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.

However, there was no clarity about what vitality and viability was, so 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 12 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 still 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 town centre vitality and viability (see Fig 4 below).

The challenging headlines about town centres, and the speed of change that they now seem to be experiencing, led us to question the extent to which the 25 factors are still relevant five years on. We therefore undertook another literature review over the summer of 2019 as part of the development work for the High Streets Task Force. This identified 36 new factors that had arisen as town centres sought to respond to change. We have worked with a panel of experts to review all 237 factors and revised top 25 has now been issued and we shared these in the four later workshops. This is the list showing not just the headline term but also what it comprises.

Priority	Component Factors
ACTIVITY*	Opening hours; footfall; shopping hours; evening economy
RETAIL OFFER	Retailer offer; retailer representation
VISION & STRATEGY	Leadership; collaboration; area development strategies
EXPERIENCE	Centre image; service quality; visitor satisfaction; familiarity; atmosphere
APPEARANCE	Visual appearance; cleanliness; ground floor frontages
PLACE MANAGEMENT	Centre management; shopping centre management; Town Centre Management (TCM); place management; Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)
NECESSITIES	Car-parking; amenities; general facilities
Anchors*	Presence of anchors - which give locations their basic character and signify importance
NON-RETAIL OFFER	Attractions; entertainment; non-retail offer; leisure offer
MERCHANDISE	Range/Quality of goods; assortments; merchandising
WALKING	Walkability; pedestrianisation/pedestrian flow; cross-shopping; linked trips; connectivity
PLACE MARKETING	Centre marketing; marketing; orientation/flow
NETWORKS & PARTNERSHIPS WITH COUNCIL	Networking; partnerships; community leadership; retail/tenant trust; tenant/manager relations; strategic alliances; centre empowerment; stakeholder power; engagement
ACCESSIBLE	Convenience; accessibility
DIVERSITY	Range/quality of shops; tenant mix; tenant variety; availability of alternative formats; store characteristics; comparison/convenience; chain vs independent; supermarket impact; retail diversity; retail choice
ATTRACTIVENESS	Sales/turnover; place attractiveness; vacancy rates; attractiveness; retail spend; customer/catchment views; Construction of out-of-town centre
MARKETS*	Traditional markets; street trading
RECREATIONAL SPACE	Recreational areas; public space; open space
BARRIERS TO ENTRY	Barriers to entry; landlords
Safety/Crime	A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting
ADAPTABILITY	Retail flexibility; retail fragmentation; flexibility; store/centre design; retail unit size; store development; rents turnover
LIVEABLE	Multi/mono-functional; liveability; personal services; mixed use
REDEVELOPMENT PLANS*	Planning blight; regeneration
Functionality*	The degree to which a centre fulfils a role – e.g. service centre, employment centre, residential centre, tourist centre
INNOVATION*	Opportunities to experiment; retail Innovation

Figure 4: 25 factors for vitality and viability

Interpreting the table

First, priorities in capitals represent more than one factor. Those in lower case represent a single factor.

Second, the nearer the top of the table the higher the priority score, however this does not necessarily mean all towns/high streets need to focus on **ACTIVITY** before they tackle **INNOVATION**. Rather, these 25 Priorities are a *framework* by which place leaders can *assess* the current performance of their high street/town centre. We recommend that each town undertakes an audit to identify those areas in which they underperforming or not performing. The results will enable them to *diagnose* which priorities are likely to have the most impact – and then *act* through making an appropriate intervention. It is then important to *evaluate*, to know if interventions work (or not).

Finally, the priorities that are marked with an asterisk in the table are either new or amended for 2019. **ACTIVITY** now includes footfall as it is important to measure activity on the street, not just consider when the business and other services are open. **ANCHORS** now refer to universities, hospitals, major leisure attractions (and even Mablethorpe's beach), in other words anything that is attracting a significant amount of people to a location – not just anchor stores.

NON-RETAIL OFFER is a new priority for 2019. Previously, any part of a town's offer that was not retail was included in **DIVERSITY** – but as the non-retail offer becomes more important to many high streets then it becomes as a priority in its own right.

MARKETS are also new for 2019. They are our oldest form of collective retailing, however, the transformation of markets into food halls and other ways in which markets are reinventing demonstrates how they are now improving the vitality and viability of many towns.

REDEVELOPMENT PLANS are another new priority for 2019. Unfortunately, some town centre regeneration has been misguided and, after the financial crash, other plans have stalled, leading to situations of *planning blight*, both of which have a negative impact on town centres and high streets.

FUNCTIONALITY is another new priority for 2019. Functionality refers to the various purposes that towns serve. In some locations certain functions dominate but others have more of a multifunctional economy. Research has demonstrated that understanding these functions is important before visions, strategies and other interventions are planned.

Finally, **INNOVATION**, or opportunities to experiment, is recognised as a priority in 2019. Successful transformation is not just dependent on traditional investment and development, it can also be kick-started by pop-up shops, festivals, events, and community use of redundant retail space. The message here is that place leaders and partnerships need to be creative and experiment.

Understanding Alford

Alford is one of the smaller towns in East Lindsey with a population of 3459 in the 2011 Census. It has a small core of town centre attractions around a market square. The workshop was well attended by a diverse range of stakeholders from the town who were very engaged and enthusiastic about their town.

Alford is an historic market town and markets are one of the recent successes of modern retailing, showing unprecedented growth in recent years in terms of the number of markets operating, which

is why they now feature in our 25 factors. Other research by the Institute of Place Management shows that good markets can make a real difference to footfall in a town (Markets Matter 2016).

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

POSITIVE FACTORS	NEGATIVE FACTORS
Good buildings	Limited range of shops
Volunteers/active community	Limited trading hours
Arts and crafts/craft market	Confused offer
Good schools/grammar schools	Nothing for young people
Location	Lack of infrastructure maintenance
New promotions group	Negative image
Free parking on market day	No reason to stop
	Limited range of activities

The workshop then explored some of the key drivers of retail change before participants again worked in groups to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for Alford. These were summarised at the workshop but the table below covers all the issues mentioned.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage • Architecture • Arts and crafts • Community/volunteering • Localism • Schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor food offer • Opening hours • Neglected shops • Unloved • Poor marketing • Divided responsibilities • Poor bus information • Poor infrastructure • No reason to stop
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low cost of investment/low barriers • New housing • Craft market/arts and crafts • Evening economy • Heritage/culture/tourism • Website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic • Low skills impacts recruitment • Declining public investment • Lack of policing • Competition from other towns

In undertaking exercises of this kind, it is important to understand the scale of the town. Alford is a small place. It is unlikely to have the range of attractions of a larger centre. Small places need to serve their local communities well. Our work in other smaller centres has found that convenience and reliability are important parts of their offer, but the responses seem to suggest this may be being undermined in Alford by the restricted and uncoordinated trading hours (a point picked up as a negative factor for vitality and viability and as a weakness). If you are not certain that an offer will be available, inevitably you will go elsewhere. Activity is a key factor for vitality and viability, opening hours are a critical part of this and this means not just actual time but consistency of operation as well. Small towns need to work hard to serve their communities.

We have no footfall data from Alford to determine what type of town it is based on usage patterns. Having talked through the town types, we asked participants in the workshop to individually choose the town type they most thought it resembled. Although no-one suggested it was a Comparison centre (it isn't), there was an even divide amongst the other three town types. Our observation would suggest that whilst participants may think the town special, it does not have critical mass or outstanding features to make it perform as a Speciality town, and therefore we think this is probably not borne out. Equally, though the town may attract more visitors in the summer months, looking at the nature of retailing, cafes, and hotel accommodation in the town, we do not believe it would exhibit a Holiday town pattern and so we would think the town is Multifunctional. This may mean that on certain days the town is busier but the overall level of activity across the year is fairly even. On busy days, when events, fairs or markets take place, the town and the businesses within it need to respond and support such initiatives through extended trading to maximise impact.

Although heritage was identified as a key strength in Alford, we had similar responses in Louth, Horncastle and Spilsby. Participants in this workshop identified competition from other towns as a threat and 'no reason to stop' as a weakness and negative factor for vitality and viability. Is there anything that makes Alford special? What would distinguish it from other places?

One thing that came through the analysis, was that there was no agreed sense of direction for the town and no identified place leadership. This is not uncommon as too many locations have no leadership at all, or are stuck with a model that is dysfunctional and where challenges and issues are met with apathy. All town centres and high streets are subject to the same factors that influence their success (or failure) but only some have the collective capacity to act. Place leadership needs to be understood as something quite fluid, a source of energy and the capacity to bring about change in a *collaborative* fashion. This needs to go beyond the local authority and there is a need for partnership with the wider communities. Places need to be willing to restructure their management and governance models so they are periodically reinvigorated and fit for purpose.

Recommendations for Alford

The 25 Priorities are a useful framework for action, but are not particularly strategic. In other words, it is a good summary of everything you might possibly be getting on with, but there is no attempt to *group* or *structure* the priorities. Nevertheless, it is really good at identifying some quick wins and encouraging action to happen fast.

The Institute has undertaken other research in recent years that addressed this and developed a second framework for place leaders and partnerships that has four strategic approaches: Repositioning, Reinventing, Rebranding and Restructuring.

Our earlier research and pilot projects have demonstrated that this 4Rs framework provides some structure to an incredibly complex process. It distinguishes between the processes of analysis and decision making (*repositioning*), effecting change (*reinventing*), communication (*rebranding*) and governance/spatial planning (*restructuring*).

Repositioning

The workshop started the repositioning process. It identified how some of Alford's community perceive the town centre. Repositioning is about ensuring an understanding of the performance and health of a centre and exploring how it can best meet the needs of the community it serves. One way to initiate further action is to use the 25 factors as an audit tool, to see what is missing, what is underperforming and what is thriving. It is also about more open sharing of information, so that trends and changes are more widely understood. How can Alford better serve its local catchment and can it do anything to make people stop in the town?

Reinventing

Whilst understanding the performance and direction of the town is important, it is also essential to do something. A process of *reinvention* is needed. Transformation needs to start. This might be through temporary interventions such as events and festivals. There were several mentions of the craft market in town and it may be development of this that generates a distinctive offer for the town. Schools were mentioned as a strength of the town and they may provide opportunities for greater engagement and interaction with the town.

A simple "town tidy" may have an initial impact as there were concerns expressed about the town appearing unloved. This could include enhanced planting and colour around the town centre using the arts and crafts skills in the town to design banners and other installations for the town. It should also include updating information at the bus stops on bus times and a "what to do in Alford" information. The community sense and volunteers were mentioned as positives during the workshop, and that was evident through the positive participation. This is something that can also be capitalised on to develop a programme of interventions and events that can draw people into town.

As mentioned above, we also think current trends show the benefit of good markets and the difference they can make for town centres. It may be hard to change the market in one small town, but working with other local markets may produce ideas for improvement. This could include themed markets, youth markets and other initiatives seen elsewhere.

In talking with some venue operators in Alford, we did discover something that was not mentioned in the workshop and that is the number of funerals that now take place locally, drawing people from a considerable distance. There may be ways of making more of this to the benefit of the town by providing additional services and resources.

Rebranding

Although the workshop identified that people were likely to think positively about Alford in terms of its heritage, we have noted that this was the case in other local towns. What could make Alford stand out? How might negative perceptions about the strength of the offer be overcome?

Rebranding includes better stakeholder communications, not just marketing and PR activities. It is about ensuring positive messages are co-ordinated and disseminated. Not wasting effort trying to market local events to distant consumers, but ensuring good, clear communication about change in the town and the range of activities on offer. Social media now allows communities to be much more open in sharing information and generating involvement and this could be supported by a local website focused on the town.

It is also important that positive images are communicated when in the town centre. There were various comments that Alford appeared ‘unloved’ and ‘uncared for’. The community can work together to make a difference here, and this is done in many towns through volunteers initiating change.

Restructuring

Restructuring is both about the structures of governance and management in a town and the physical fabric. Traffic was mentioned as a threat in the workshop responses and it certainly appears quite dominant in the town but when major roads are involved, then decisions are more difficult. Improvements to the physical fabric in the town through encouragement to property owners may be beneficial as the architectural quality of the town was seen as a strength.

It is important also to take note of the information shared in the workshop about the scale and pace of change on high streets. Space that has traditionally been seen as retail may not be reoccupied going forward by retailers. East Lindsey’s Local Plan recognises the diversity of uses that are important for a town centre and the need to preserve a convenience retail offer, but other uses may now be more relevant for improving the sustainability of the town. This includes relocation of public services, encouraging leisure, fitness, healthcare, workspace, housing, culture, entertainment and community resources. To achieve this will involve work with public authorities, with landowners, property agents and the wider community.

In terms of governance and management, it is good that community engagement was seen as a strength. This now needs to be focused on effective place leadership, the form of which needs to suit the town and those engaged. In small towns it is not possible to generate sufficient income from a Business Improvement District, where local businesses pay an extra levy on their rate, to make the establishment of such a structure worthwhile. The town is also very small to look for a dedicated Town Centre Management initiative, as these are typically found in much larger centres where a number of businesses make significant contributions towards the cost alongside the local authority.

Community-led initiatives are, however, the other option. Although these can be informal and just bring people with a common interest together, in Yarm, near Stockton-on-Tees, a town with around 8,000 inhabitants, local businesses have come together to establish a Community Interest Company which is promoting the town through a website: <https://visityarm.co.uk/> and has led to Stockton Council appointing an officer to work with them one day a week for a nine month period.

We would suggest that the next step is to use the knowledge from the workshop as summarised in this report to audit the town based on the 25 factors and then to identify key actions that would start to make improvements. These need to be things that have community support and are achievable. Not only should things be done but it is important to publicise the change and to communicate with the whole of Alford what is being done. Our experience in other places shows that this will bring in more participants for future initiatives and generate ideas. A place leadership group needs to be established to develop a programme of change and to coordinate and drive forward improvement.

Conclusion

Many of the global trends that are impacting town centres will have only a minimal impact on Alford, but the ageing population, technology changes, and undoubtedly economic change may well. The workshop identified good things about the town as well as things people were concerned with. To respond to this means the establishment of a new process that can involve those who are concerned and want to make things happen – a town leadership group. This should be inclusive but comprised of people willing to make change happen. The size of the town and current trends makes major intervention unlikely but small scale initiatives can make a difference. Look to build on things already existing and initiatives that people see as strengths. Think carefully about whether the trading hours of the town are serving the needs of the catchment or passing customers. Remember the added benefit of social media networks that can increase access to markets and customers and keep people informed about how Alford is changing.

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