

Attracting shoppers back to your town

THE CHALLENGE

An estimated £100million a year is spent by Forest residents outside the district – it was therefore becoming essential that the retail sector in the four main town centres of the Forest of Dean needed to be revitalised.

Local people also needed to be encouraged to change their perceptions in terms of the quality and choice of goods available locally, the importance of supporting their local community and its economy and the unique selling points of local shops.

At the same time, retailers needed to be encouraged to improve and modernise in terms of the range and quality of goods available, promotion and customer service.



DEVELOPING THE IDEA

In 2003, an event was held to discuss retail issues as a whole within the Forest of Dean, in partnership with FoD District Council, Business in the Community, Curry's and Boots. The aim was to help gain an understanding of retail issues in the Forest's four market towns – Cinderford, Coleford, Lydney and Newent - from the private sector's perspective.

One main outcome was an understanding that high-end national stores such as Boots and Curry's saw the Forest as an unviable location and were unlikely to relocate to the area. As a result, it was deemed appropriate to develop a group to support and promote the Forest's existing retail sector, which led to the formation of the Retail Support Group.

The Group went on to develop the Forest's own 'First Stop Local Shop' project with input from partners including Town Centre retailers, Business Link, Community Partnerships, Royal Forest of Dean College, key local businesses, Town Councils and voluntary and community groups.

A detailed study was commissioned to assess the vitality of the town centres. This provided invaluable baseline data to provide a 'snapshot in time' of the health of the District's four towns, and provided tangible evidence of the need for a project to tackle the challenging issues identified above.





MAKING IT HAPPEN

A lengthy bidding process led by Forest of Dean District Council finally resulted in a successful bid to the Gloucestershire Rural Renaissance Initiative (with SWRDA funding) for £250,000 over three years. In the bid it was demonstrated that, through contributions from the District Council and the private sector, an additional £250k would be drawn into the project.

Approved in May 2005, the project team was recruited by mid August 05. As at September 2006, the project team in place at the FoD consists of:

- Project Manager: Market Towns Regeneration Officer – Full time – FoDDC Funded.
- Project Officer: Retail Support Officer – Full Time – FoDDC Funded.
- Project Officer: Retail Support Officer – Full Time – RRI Funded for 3 years.

Once the team was in place, work started on turning the ideas of the Retail Support Group into reality. This includes a range of initiatives and projects which are highlighted in a series of newsletters produced to inform retailers and the public. Please visit the First Stop, Local Shop website at www.firststoplocalshop.co.uk and click on the retailers' section to view these newsletters.

KEEPING IT GOING

- **Bi-monthly meetings** of the Retail Support group are used to:
 - Inform members of project progress.
 - Provide a vital forum for feedback and evaluation of the projects.
- **Communication** of progress to wider retail community via:
 - Quarterly Newsletter Forest Retail News.
 - Retailer bulletin every 3-4 weeks sent via email to all retailers and partners.
 - Regular media coverage – local and national.
 - Web presence.
- **Campaigns and promotional activities** including:
 - Retailer Awards to celebrate the best of what is being achieved and raise further awareness.
 - Christmas wrapping service.
 - Reward Card to reward shoppers for buying 'local'.
 - Branded shopping bags.

- **Resources:** Important to keeping the project going, as cannot rely on voluntary and goodwill contributions for three year period – too demanding on partners and retailers, after all, they have a business to run as well!
- **Monitoring:** Ensure achievements and progress of the project is monitored to find out what is working and what isn't. This is essential in order to:
 - Convince doubters that project is working – hence increase participation.
 - Attract finance from private sector and partners.
 - Make changes to keep project on track and meeting the right needs.
 - One Year On – report on what has been achieved after the first full year of operation – see www.firststoplocalshop.co.uk

TOP TIPS

- **Identify the need in tangible and quantifiable terms:**
 - It may seem obvious to you that your town centre is struggling and the retail sector needs support, but you must have a grasp of the baseline figures, e.g. vacancy rates, number of businesses closing per year, percentage of charity shops, average commercial rents, footfall rates etc.
 - This information helps provide a solid case as to whether the town is in decline and in need of assistance, as well as showing that any improvements coming from a project can also be compared to this baseline info.
- **Involve the right people:**
 - Make sure you get the retailer community on board and ensure they are central to the formation of any project ideas.
 - Include community and voluntary groups to ensure the project has representative input from the wider community as well as the private sector.
 - Get the local media on board – communication is key to getting things done, and a campaign to save town centres cannot fail to get the local newspapers on board.
- **Monitor and Communicate**
 - Keep track of accomplishments and don't be afraid to shout about them!
 - Momentum and a Feel Good Factor do wonders for getting people involved that may have had their doubts at first.
 - Tell them, tell them and tell them again! Don't let people think things aren't happening – Keep that momentum going.

- **Get the resources in place**

- Don't underestimate the time and workload involved in running a scheme.
- Relying wholly on voluntary participation from retailers and partners may not be sustainable in the long term without the resources to support them.
- Meetings, newsletters, visits all take time – can retailers be expected to do it all **and** run a business?

- **You can't beat face to face contact**

- Don't rely on Mail-outs to get people involved.
- Go out and visit shopkeepers, tell them about what you're trying to achieve, how it will benefit them and why they should get involved.

CONTACTS

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First Stop Local Shop

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Gloucestershire Rural Renaissance scheme

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www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/ruralrenaissance

Market and Coastal Towns Association

www.mcti.org.uk

South West Regional Development Agency

www.southwestrda.org.uk

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'Attracting shoppers back to your town' is one in a series of case studies, sponsored by the Market and Coastal Towns Association. each spotlighting an issue or challenge faced by a GMTF member town.

Each case study presents:

- the **initial challenge** or issue faced by the town
- how a **solution** was developed
- how it was **rolled out**
- how it is being **sustained**
- **top tips** – useful information and advice to other communities which may be facing similar issues
- **contact details** to help you find out more