

## **Research Study**

### **Future Contribution of Small and Medium Sized Towns**

The Heart of the South West has a diverse network of settlements which include growing cities such as Exeter and Plymouth, industrial towns such as Bridgwater and Yeovil and market and coastal communities such as Torbay and Barnstaple. However, 38% of the population live in rural towns, villages and settlements across 4,230 square miles, reflecting the rural nature of much of the area. Whilst this diversity is a strength which protects the area from economic shocks, it also poses a challenge in terms of securing agglomeration effects.

The M5/A38 corridor provides an economic spine that runs through the core of the area from Bridgwater to Plymouth, with arterial roads such as the A30/303 supporting growth and productivity in the East. However, peripherality and distance from markets poses a challenge for significant parts of North and West Devon and Western Somerset and the gap between coastal communities and non-coastal communities is widening yet their importance relevance to their rural catchment areas is still a key factor to the success of the Local Industrial Strategy in the Heart of the South West.

The future of our cities and towns needs transformation to ensure they provide the services and infrastructure needed for future prosperity and sustainability. There is a need for co-design and pilot integrated approaches to transforming the area's rural and coastal towns which are at risk of being left behind with measures to improve livability, connectivity and local accountability

MHCLG in recognising the need for transformation and transition, launched the Future High Streets Fund in 2018. Fourteen towns within the Heart of the South West LEP area submitted applications.

This has resulted in the following towns within the Heart of the South West LEP area moving forward to the next stage:

Barnstaple  
Bideford  
Newton Abbot  
Paignton  
Plymouth City Centre  
Taunton  
Yeovil

MHCLG assessed bids according to value for money and other elements of their business case (e.g. deliverability, strategic fit to the objectives of the fund and ability to co-fund bids where appropriate). Local areas set out how their plans will enable their local high street to adapt to changes in consumer demands and then give details of individual projects with a clear economic benefit. This is not for funding to expand traditional retail on their high street or for short term enhancements or promotions.

The need for evidence based research has been identified to demonstrate how the transformation of our towns and cities will link to the Local Industrial Strategy and how the work will help to deliver the core objectives of the Strategy.

It is also suggested that research around the positioning of Barnstaple/Bideford in looking at the future on the towns in relation to the town deal agenda should be undertaken. Although currently not in the top 100 towns list, research on the future agenda for Glastonbury should also be undertaken to provide a stated position for its future. It is expected that funding for this research will lever in some local authority contributions alongside.

Inclusion of identified links would help to deliver the LIS as well as add a strategic alignment to the aims.

Identified areas for research could be:

Relevance to the Growth Spine – M5/A358

Digital connectivity

Innovation/technology adoption

Employment Hubs – to fit with the HOSW inclusive growth ambitions

Food and Drink

Tourism

EV charging network

Mobility services

Green Infrastructure – cycleways and pathways

Urban Green Spaces – including natural assets for carbon capture

Health and Wellbeing

Rural connectivity

In addition, we need to be able to inform on what the key barriers and opportunities to this – prompt for UKSPF investment, town deals (Garden Towns), might be and what might the LEP look to focus on.

There is also a need for a review of what has been promoted across the area through High Streets Fund proposals with any learning and conclusions from this.

It is proposed that a research project is commissioned to provide the evidence base and alignment of objectives. It is envisaged that this will cost around £12.5k and will be commissioned by Somerset County Council on behalf of the HOSW LEP.

A working group will be established to oversee and inform the research project to ensure valuable input from partners.

This evidence will also help the LEP Leadership Place Group to focus on areas of work which will make a strategic difference and complement the work of the Future High Streets Fund.

Decision – Somerset County Council will commission a study on behalf of the HOSW LEP and will also establish a working group for this strand of work, comprising public and private sector partners.