

CHAPTER 12

Unravelling the Complex Nature of Events-Focused Policy: A Framework to Aid Understanding

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Introduction

This chapter explores the events-focused policy often adopted by local authorities, the aim of which is usually to attract visitors into town centres in the hope that additional economic activity will result. This is one of a range of tools employed by town centre managers (TCMs), business improvement district (BID) managers or local authority officials as they attempt to animate urban spaces and add vibrancy to what can sometimes be perceived as mundane or functional town centres, while at the same time demonstrating to local businesses that they are implementing policies that help to drive up footfall and support local economic activity. High profile, large-scale annual festivals, such as the Edinburgh International Festival or Notting Hill Carnival have done much to promote the success of such a policy, with commercial economic impact studies indicating significant revenue benefits (e.g. London Development Agency 2003; SQW Consulting 2005). As attractive as they may seem, large-scale events such as these are rarely attainable for smaller cities and towns.

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Further, not all towns have the existing infrastructure to enable an events-focused policy to be successful. The research presented here explores how one local authority in the south of England implements its local economic development policy through an events programme, in order to demonstrate the complexities involved: complexities of place as well as event, and the interconnected nature of both. Serving as a cautionary example for TCMs, BID managers and local economic development officers alike, a framework to aid understanding of the delicate balance is proposed.

The framework comprises a set of factors based on empirical research undertaken at three different events in separate market towns within the Test Valley Borough Council (TVBC)¹ area of Hampshire. The aim of this framework is to provide policymakers and other local decision makers with a structure that facilitates understanding of the implications of hosting events in their respective town centres and high streets. In addition, it is intended to help such decision makers reflect on what they aim to achieve by hosting an event or series of events and encourages them to consider that increased footfall may not necessarily result in increased economic activity for the town's retail and service provision. This framework is at an early stage of development and although it would benefit from further testing, global events have, unfortunately, overtaken the ability to do this. Consequently, a Covid-19 recovery consideration may need to be accounted for, incorporating factors such as perceived risk, health and safety issues and crowd management.

The British Town Centre Predicament

The crisis facing British town centres and high streets has been well-documented for more than a decade, with considerable debate at all levels of government, as well as much academic study. Various issues have contributed to this crisis, not least of which is the Covid-19 pandemic. The resulting landscape is very complex, and more than one strategy will be needed to provide a means of recovery for the ailing town centres, the number of which continues to rise. First came the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, combined with historical issues centred on disputed planning laws (PP21), which resulted in large out-of-town developments and the resulting move away from traditional centres. Then came the internet revolution, partnered with changing consumer behaviour, which saw the advent of 'click and collect' and home delivery services, both of which have grown significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic (ONS 2021). Until this pandemic all but closed down Britain's high streets and town centres, the most pressing problem concerned uncertainty and weakening consumer confidence brought about as a result of the Brexit vote and the ongoing lack of decisive action. In addition to this, retailers and service providers in town centres were often saddled with lengthy leasehold contracts and excessive local taxation. These combined issues were sufficient to cause many town

centres and high streets to suffer from increasing and long-term vacancy rates. TCMs and other local decision makers thus began to seek additional means of attempting to attract more footfall into these places in the hope that additional spend by visitors would boost the local economy.

Town Centre Revitalisation Attempts

There have been numerous efforts over the last decade to increase understanding of how to support town centre revitalisation, for example the Portas Review published in 2011 (Portas 2011), which resulted in 28 recommendations, some of which were successful, others less so. The recommendations acknowledged the importance of markets, one of which was to create a national market day (recommendation no 4). Acknowledging that not all towns were suffering either in the same way or to the same extent, Wrigley and Dolega (2011, 2538) determined that a town's 'adaptive capacity and resilience' were contributory factors to its ability to survive at times of crisis.

In response to the Portas Review, Grimsey (2013) outlined an alternative vision for the future of town centres and saw them becoming community hubs with less reliance on the traditional retail provision. This review also called for a step change in the way business rates were charged. More recently, in 2019, the High Streets Task Force (HSTF) was created with membership from industry, government and academia to tackle the systemic problems experienced by some town centres and high streets.

An update to the 2013 Grimsey Review was published in 2018, followed by a Covid-19 Supplement in June 2020 (Grimsey 2020). This latest publication emphasises the need to put the community at the centre of the reimagined town centres and high streets – much the same role performed by town and village centres in centuries gone by. Grimsey further recommends the creation of more green space and cites an example from Belgium, where a town centre car park that has been transformed into green space now provides an area for events to be located (Grimsey 2020, 27). Accordingly, small-scale events, such as food festivals, markets and music or arts festivals have a role to perform in this reimagined town centre of the future, supporting a Covid-19 recovery.

The Appeal of an Events-Focused Policy

A wide assortment of events punctuates the everyday familiarity of numerous town centres and high streets in the UK, adding vibrancy and providing the opportunity to create memorable experiences for all involved – from the weekly market, some of which can trace their origins back at least to the Middle Ages, when authority to hold a market or fair was granted to landowners or the monarch's representative by Royal Charter (Letters 2005; Stanley, 1889), through

to monthly speciality markets, such as farmers' markets, to the less frequent annual arts or music festivals, or Christmas markets. These are all occurrences that resonate with many and are used by TCMs and the like to perpetuate interest and encourage repeat visits. Some extend to just a few hours, while others may continue for a number of weeks. This variance of timescales offers a flexible approach to local policymakers, as costs and resources vary accordingly.

Festivals and events are known to provide a focal point for local communities, often bringing diverse groups together to create a 'heterotopia'; even if only for a limited time (Quinn and Ryan 2019). Further, they are capable of engendering a sense of place (Derrett 2003) or civic pride (Gratton et al. 2016), and offer a forum for creating or strengthening social capital (Wilks 2011). Festivals and events have the potential to transform the image of a place, which in turn leads to renewal, even in small, rural towns (Connell and Gibson 2011). For town centre visitors, the overall experience is enhanced when events take place (Stocchi, Har and Haji 2016), as they offer a stimulus for excitement and encourage interaction with supplementary activities. Recognising the significance of town centre events, the British Government has published advice for town centre management relating to the benefits of developing an events programme (Housing Communities and Local Government Committee 2019). Taking all of this into consideration, it is hardly surprising that a crammed events programme is a popular feature of most places – or at least until the Covid-19 pandemic halted such endeavours, once public gatherings were prohibited.

Covid-19 and its effects aside, an events-focused strategy seems particularly appealing when they are seen to achieve a high profile and demonstrate success in one form or another elsewhere. Well-known examples include Hay-on-Wye Literary Festival, Notting Hill Carnival and Edinburgh International Festival. These festivals take over the host location and its environs for a period of time and act to promote the place to a wider, often global, audience. In turn, this activity serves as a tourist promotion to attract visitors long after the festival is over. Such a prominent legacy effect is a driver for other towns to engage in similar ventures (Finkel and Platt 2020; Richards 2017).

At a smaller, and arguably more widely accessible scale, research has found that regular markets (e.g. weekly charter markets, which sell a wide and varied assortment of goods) increase footfall (Hallsworth et al. 2015). Grimsey has acknowledged the 'crucial role' played by events in driving increased footfall in his supplement and, indeed, his case study of Roeslare, Belgium, explicitly alludes to a coordinated series of events (2020, 43).

The theory is clear; that an events-focused policy need not be an onerous venture in order to reap the benefits. In reality, many other factors are at play. A vital caveat is this: simply because an event is successful in one place, assumptions should not be made that success will be repeated if the event is replicated elsewhere. Success can be measured in multiple ways, for example: increased footfall; consumer/visitor/retailer satisfaction or cooperation; intention for

repeat visits; increased turnover in host retail and service provision. TCMs and local decision makers need to consider these different measurements prior to embarking on an events-focused policy and, in addition, manage expectations of all stakeholders in order that priorities can be set accordingly.

The additional complication now is that although events are significant contributors to driving footfall into town centres, with distancing measures and additional health and safety requirements, events that are likely to attract large crowds are going to remain challenging for the foreseeable future. The topic of Covid-19 in Britain has been notably confused by the perception that Government policy may have ignored prevention (Scally, Jacobson and Abbasi 2020) and because communications appear to change with some regularity. Ntounis et al. (2020) have attempted to provide clarity with regard to social distancing measures for individuals and groups in 'dynamic spaces' (i.e. where people are constantly moving), such as town centres. With the arrival of the so-called 'Freedom Day' on Monday 19 July 2021 in England, when most legal restrictions were removed (Cabinet Office 2021), including the compulsory maintenance of a two-metre distance between individuals, this advice may not be necessary in the longer term. Despite criticism of the Government's decision to proceed with this decision (Ball 2021), the relaxation of legislation should come as welcome news for smaller towns, such as traditional market towns with narrow street patterns, some of which introduced one-way pedestrian traffic at the start of the pandemic.

Test Valley Borough Council's Approach to Events-focused Policy

TVBC is a semi-rural borough within the county of Hampshire, in the south of England, with three main urban centres of differing sizes. Andover to the north is the largest, both geographically and in terms of population; Romsey to the south is somewhat smaller; and Stockbridge, located in the centre is the smallest. Each of these places was considered historically to be a market town, having been granted a Royal Charter to hold markets and fairs during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Letters 2005; Stanley 1889). Both Romsey and Stockbridge retain many historic characteristics, including for Romsey, narrow winding streets. Although Andover also has some historic remnants, it has largely been engulfed by modern development, including a covered shopping centre, which has moved the focal point of the town away from the traditional square.

The borough's Local Economic Development team considers their events programme to perform a vital role in the broader economic development policy, to the extent that its expansion has been included in the third action point of the Economic Development Strategy Action Plan 2016–19, along with environmental enhancement, 'to improve the offer of our town centres' (Test Valley Borough Council 2016, 1). The borough-wide calendar of events includes weekly

charter markets, monthly farmers' markets and annual festivals, including an agricultural show. These are included in tourist promotion literature, in conjunction with details of visitor attractions and historical information, as a means of illustrating the vibrancy and character of the area, in order to attract visitors.

The size, layout and infrastructure of the towns is such that any event held within them is going to be limited in scope. It is worth mentioning, therefore, that the earlier examples provided of large-scale city-centred festivals are unrealistic for places such as these. Market towns are much smaller, in terms of population and geographic size, so present different characteristics, opportunities and challenges.

Three Different Events for Three Different Market Towns

This research examines a separate one-day event that takes place in each of the three market towns described above. As one of the project sponsors, TVBC originally requested an economic impact assessment of the borough's annual events to be undertaken. It transpired, however, that there was no annual event of note held in Andover, so a monthly event was included instead. A brief overview of each event and respective town now follows, while a more comprehensive account can be found in Rust (2017).

The Beggars Fair: Romsey

This annual folk and roots music festival takes place on the second Saturday of July. However, it was cancelled in 2020 and has been cancelled for 2021, owing to ongoing uncertainty about public gatherings. The event has a chequered history, having originated as a weekend festival in 1993. It is organised by a committee of local community groups, businesses, residents and town councillors, and is free to attend. A road closure enables the various musicians and performers to be located at numerous sites around the town centre, while the mediaeval street pattern facilitates the containment of sounds, yet simultaneously provides enticement to visitors as they wish to discover the origin of music heard in the distance, or around narrow turns. A pedestrianised area in front of the Abbey provides space for a stage and a curtain-sided trailer is used for this purpose (see Figure 12.1). The town's public houses also play host to bands during the day and into the evening. In addition, a recreation ground adjacent to the town centre is used for children's activities and a forum to showcase young musicians, as well as to provide an area for visitors to sit and absorb the atmosphere.

Although the Beggars Fair is promoted as a family event, it has experienced troubles in the past and began to develop a reputation as an event for drunkards. This culminated in a serious public order incident in 2011, reported



Figure 12.1: Beggars Fair, Romsey. Photograph: Elaine Rust.

as a ‘mass brawl’ in the local press (Russell 2011). As a result, the event was reviewed and reduced to a single day. Further mitigations were implemented to prevent similar behaviour in future, for example, an alcohol ban in public open spaces and all pubs required to install fencing and employ security guards for the duration of the event. The memory of this incident endures and has created division within the local community.

Trout ‘n About: Stockbridge

Trout ‘n About is an annual food and craft festival, which has taken place on the first Sunday in August since 2008. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was cancelled as a live event in 2020, however it relocated online as a virtual event spanning 16 days and it is planning to resume the live version in 2021. The festival is organised by a committee of local volunteers and a salaried event manager, and draws on additional support from local community groups. Trading stalls, vintage farm equipment displays and musicians are located along both sides of the long, straight Georgian High Street but owing to the nature of the road and the absence of alternative routes, it is not possible to close the road (see Figure 12.2). Traffic congestion can be a problem, as the event draws in large numbers from a wide area.

The name of the festival originates from the historic connection between the River Test, which runs through the town, and trout fishing. Stockbridge is



Figure 12.2: Trout 'n About, Stockbridge. Photograph: Elaine Rust.

renowned in the fly-fishing fraternity, with the Grosvenor Hotel in the High Street providing a home for the historic and exclusive Houghton Fishing Club. This connection is not clearly understood by many visitors and is not especially aided by the lack of trout-related produce available to purchase at the event. A concern that has not gone unnoticed by the organisers, however, they struggle to include the local fish-related producers.

Andover Farmers' and Crafts Market

The market was introduced by the local authority in an attempt to draw visitors to the town on Sundays, which have seen lower footfall than other days of the week. It is located along the part-pedestrianised High Street, adjacent to a covered shopping centre and takes place once a month between February and December. Prior to the introduction of the market, a countywide rotating farmers' market, run by an independent organisation, visited once a month. With disappointing sales and despite the offer of a financial incentive to retain Andover on its circuit, it withdrew as members felt they would benefit from increased business elsewhere in the county. The current market is managed by a member of TVBC staff. Although the market aims to attract visitors to the town in order to support the existing retail offer, during its earlier days many of the retailers remained closed on Sundays, thus losing out on potential business. Attempts have since been made to encourage Sunday opening, with varying levels of success. Andover has suffered from higher than average, as well as



Figure 12.3: Andover Farmers' and Crafts Market. Photograph: Elaine Rust.

long-term vacancy rates (Carter Jonas 2018) and Marks and Spencer, one of the town's major retailers, closed their store in April 2018.

The stalls offer a mix of fresh locally sourced produce, confectionery, art and crafts, and offers space to local charities wishing to promote themselves (see Figure 12.3). The market also provides low-cost opportunities for emerging local businesses that may not be in a position to commit to a permanent retail space.

Research Methods and Data Collection

As previously mentioned, TVBC requested an economic impact assessment be undertaken of the three events, to produce evidence of how interventions such as those included in the study contribute to the borough's economic vitality. In order to develop a more 'holistic and contextualised picture' (Peperkamp, Rooijackers and Remmers 2015, 147) of how the studied events contributed in a broader social and cultural sense, a qualitative component was added. Thus, a mixed methods approach was taken and implemented across all three locations. Data were collected via two primary methods: semi-structured interviews with event organisers, local councillors, local government officers and event sponsors; and questionnaire surveys of event attendees, event traders/performers, local businesses and residents. The purpose of the interviews was to develop an understanding of how and why the events were created; how they have evolved over time; perceived benefits and any associated issues. The

questionnaires captured attitudinal data, the purpose of which was to aid understanding of likes, dislikes and behaviours connected to the events. In addition to this, expenditure data were also collected from event visitors, performers and traders, which contributed to the economic impact assessment.

Findings and Discussion

Economic Impact

The results indicate that it is the *type* of event that influences the level of economic benefit the host location receives. Events with a predominantly selling focus have the potential to draw expenditure away from the town's retail offer. Such was the case for both the farmers' market and the food festival (Trout 'n About). In contrast, an event that is predominantly entertainment-focused (i.e. the folk music festival – the Beggars Fair) can result in the opposite, although expenditure is likely to occur mainly in the food and drink service providers. Specifically, these results indicate that the expenditure ratio of event:town provision is approximately 2:1 for selling-type events and reversed for entertainment events (Rust 2017).

The attendant advice is that if a policymaker introduces a speciality market, or food-related event or festival in order to increase footfall and by association, to increase turnover for the host town's retail offer, this could be an erroneous strategy, unless other factors are accounted for and priorities adjusted accordingly. If, however, the local authority, BID Manager or TCM works with the relevant stakeholders to develop a mutually beneficial event, then it could prove to be successful. The Beggars Fair organising committee membership includes representatives from the local authority, local businesses and community groups (e.g. the local scout group), who each work together to ensure cooperation, which supports the mutual benefit. For example, the local food service providers can be overwhelmed on the day of the event, so the scout group runs a barbeque to alleviate pressure. The scout group benefits financially from the income to their organisation, as well socially, by connecting with the community. A further example presented itself at Trout 'n About, whereby the local football club provided car parking stewards and as a result, it benefited from a small funding grant donated by Trout 'n About's organising committee from surplus event income.

Social and Cultural Impacts

In terms of the social and cultural impacts, four key factors emerged from the interpretation of qualitative data. These suggest that a combination of each contribute to the ability of a town centre or high street to be able to provide an

event that is both suitable for the host and that will be able to benefit the local economy and community satisfactorily. The key to success is finding the appropriate balance between each of these factors, in conjunction with the requirement to support the local economy. The four factors are now discussed.

Atmosphere or 'Buzz'

Atmosphere in this context is connected to enjoyment, which contributes to the overall visitor experience (Getz 1989). This pleasant 'feel good factor' (Crompton 2004) has also been referred to as 'psychic income' in the literature (Crompton 2004; Gibson et al. 2014; Kim and Walker 2012). Not always easy to define, it is nevertheless closely connected to the way in which events can generate a positive feeling for all stakeholders involved, whether this is event attendees, event traders/performers, sponsors, organisers, or local businesses.

Evidence emerged from the three events that the positive atmosphere created by the events animated the towns, at least for a temporary period, and contributed to positive memories of the events and the places in which they were located. This was strongest at the Beggars Fair and Trout 'n About, as illustrated by an attendee's remark of the Beggars Fair: *'Romsey comes alive with a lovely friendly musical atmosphere.'* This emotion was much weaker at the farmers' market, where no such comments were made.

Belonging

This factor can be divided into two separate forms: the first is the level to which the event generated a sense of belonging for those involved: becoming a temporary 'insider', whether the attendee was from the local community or a visitor to the area. Cultural events provide the opportunity for out-of-the-ordinary, shared experiences and can generate a sense of belonging (del Barrio, Devesa and Herrero 2012; Getz 1989). This seemed to be strongest in relation to the annual events (i.e. the Beggars Fair and Trout 'n About), demonstrated by a resident's comment that the Beggars fair *'brings [the] community together.'* For a limited time, visitors to the towns of Romsey and Stockbridge felt as though they were locals, owing to the friendly and open environment in which the events were located. Some attendees additionally remarked that they deliberately scheduled their visit to the area to coincide with the events taking place; a suggestion that they wished to rekindle the sense of belonging they felt while at the event. Further, there was a suggestion that arrangements need not be made in advance to meet acquaintances, as a respondent noted: *'it's a very social event; I might see somebody I know.'*

The concept of exclusivity, by its very nature, implies there are outsiders – those who are not members of the group. The feeling of exclusivity can enhance

the sense of belonging (Richards and Palmer 2010), but for the outsiders – those who do not attend or wish to be involved – the events can become problematic. This was displayed in various ways. First, local residents who disliked the town being taken over, particularly in Romsey where there was a history of antisocial behaviour at the Beggars Fair:

I just don't think it's 'Romsey'. It attracts undesirables – why do we want that and the trouble it brings?

Second, at Trout 'n About, elderly or vulnerable residents in particular felt as though they were unable to leave their homes for the day owing to the crowded pavements, as demonstrated by an elderly resident: *'I only get out when someone takes me in my wheelchair and I never go to Trout n About, as it is impossible to get through the crowds with a wheelchair.'* Finally, the farmers' market was not popular with some Andover residents, who expressed their feelings of exclusion by commenting that it was either selling goods already available in the town's shops or the produce was overpriced. The latter sentiment was clearly evident in the following: *'due to the price they tend to attract a certain type of customer, which makes the atmosphere quite snobby.'*

The second form in which belonging emerged as a key factor, is the connection or fit of the event to the place – the level to which the event 'belongs' to the host location. This overlaps with place, which is discussed next.

Place

Place can also be divided into two components: First, in relation to the host town and second in relation to the physical location of the event within the host town.

Place (a): Geographic location of the host town

Powe and Hart (2008) and Powe, Pringle and Hart (2015) have discussed the characteristics of market towns and their varying ability to attract visitors, proposing that those with historic buildings, natural features or neighbouring connections to visitor attractions are most likely to benefit. Gibson et al. (2009) argue that place features strongly in the connection between culture and economic development and Richards, de Brito and Wilks (2013) observe that cultural events enable people to create their own connections to place. This latter observation has been discussed in the previous factor, however, altogether, the literature clearly connects place and events.

In this study, all three towns are considered to be market towns by the local authority and are promoted as such. Each was granted a charter centuries ago

to hold markets and fairs at various times throughout the year, so became focal points for their respective communities. Over time, this dependence has diminished, however, at different rates in each place.

Both Romsey and Stockbridge align with the findings of Powe and Hart (2008) and Powe, Pringle and Hart (2015) in that they retain historic characteristics and benefit from natural features and neighbouring attractions, so are already popular with visitors. The events are a natural fit with these locations and so, place and event are connected. Contrastingly, the farmers' market in Andover struggles, despite TVBC's consideration that it remains a market town in the traditional sense. The town has retained some historic features, for example, a museum and a former mill, which has been converted to multiple retail units. With much modern development, including the covered shopping centre, it struggles to retain the market town image, leading to a lack of connection for visitors between the farmers' market and the town. In essence, the event has an unnatural fit with the town and the sense of belonging is absent.

Place (b): Spatial location of the event

The physical spaces occupied by the events within each of the towns influence the ways in which they are experienced. The Beggars Fair is spread around the mediaeval town, with its narrow winding streets, as well as other locations, such as the recreation ground and pedestrian area in front of the Abbey. The buildings act as natural sound barriers, so noise is contained yet wafts around the street corners, enticing visitors to follow the source and discover the particular act. Trout 'n About is structured in a linear fashion, along both sides of the Georgian High Street, offering the visitor a clear line of sight along all of the stalls, enabling them to absorb everything easily. Both locations suit their respective events. Andover's farmers' market, on the other hand, is located in what would once have been the focal point of the town: a paved open area in front of the former town hall, now a café, slightly offset from the modern centre. Although a large expanse of open space, it can act as a wind tunnel, causing traders problems as they struggle to keep their gazebos secured, along with their produce. In addition, the micro locations matter: concerns were raised that consideration should be given to the location of stalls selling produce which is also on sale in the host town, for example, at Trout 'n About, a cheese stall was located directly in front of the delicatessen. Whilst the delicatessen recognised the value of the event and was in favour of it, the owner would have preferred the cheese stall to be located elsewhere. Another local independent business owner expressed frustration by stating that *'organisers should NOT duplicate goods or produce already sold in Stockbridge shops. It's just not fair!'* A small, yet clearly significant consideration.

Reputation

Bradley and Hall (2006) argue that a town's public image can be enhanced by a public event, however, an event's previous reputation can also be sufficient for it to be considered unwelcome by the community (Hubbard 2013). Antisocial behaviour, or the anticipation of it, can damage an event's reputation more than any other negative attribute, for example congestion or noise (Deery and Jago 2010). This final factor – reputation – can also be separated into two: the reputation of the event and of the place.

In terms of the event, TVBC uses all of the events in its tourist promotion material. In this way, it expects the event reputation to act as an incentive for visitors to come and contribute to place promotion. Unfortunately, in the case of the Beggars Fair, a reputation of excess alcohol consumption leading to antisocial behaviour has spread around the local community and to the neighbouring towns and villages. No serious incident has been recorded since the one mentioned earlier, however, the reputation seems to endure, as demonstrated by an attendee's comment; *'when it gets to the evening you're not so keen to stay because of the – you know – possibility of perhaps not feeling quite as safe.'* The mere thought of antisocial behaviour seems to be sufficient reason not to linger.

With regard to Trout 'n About, the name is a reference to the River Test, on which Stockbridge is located. The Test enjoys international renown for trout fishing, a day licence for which costs many hundreds of pounds. This reference is sadly lost to many visitors who are unfamiliar with this local speciality, with some visitor respondents querying the absence of trout. This is in contrast with a similar event held in Alresford, around 15 miles away, which holds an annual watercress festival, acknowledging the local connection to watercress production. The majority of the stallholders offer watercress-related products, including watercress flavoured ice cream, and cookery demonstrations using watercress are a feature of the day.

In terms of the place, how the locations are perceived is important. Romsey and Stockbridge already benefit from the characteristics discussed earlier that serve to make these towns attractive to visitors. In contrast, Andover suffers from a poor reputation, and the impression of an uninspiring town emerged from the study, as one resident remarked; *'Unfortunately, the town centre has been allowed to degenerate because of the quality of shops ... this makes us avoid the town centre.'* The perception that a town will have little to offer prospective visitors may outweigh any attraction the market provides.

Understanding Event Contributions in a Town Centre Context: A Framework

The factors discussed above can combine to form a framework for policymakers, TCMs, BID managers and other decision makers to use when developing



Figure 12.4: Framework for understanding town centre event contributions.

an economic strategy centred on a programme of events. When used alongside the common aim of generating economic activity, local decision makers should gain a clearer understanding of events-focused policy outcomes. The framework, shown in Figure 12.4, demonstrates the interconnected relationship between each of the factors discussed above, with place separated into the two components identified. By applying the framework, potential problems and mistakes may be avoided, particularly if an attempt is made to replicate an event that has been seen to be successful elsewhere. Most importantly, before doing this, the decision maker should consider what it is they are aiming to achieve: increased footfall, economic activity, or community well-being.

Conclusion

The study presented here has demonstrated how one local authority in the south of England supports an events-focused policy in its three main urban centres by exploring a different event in each of the towns. A complex illustration has

emerged, suggesting that many factors contribute to the success or otherwise of such events, which is not always thoroughly appreciated by the local decision makers who develop these strategies. At the simplest level, events attract people, which increases footfall. There is an expectation that this additional footfall should result in increased economic activity for the host location's businesses. This is the prominent perspective adopted, at least by TVBC and potentially representative of many local authorities in the UK. Such an expectation may, however, be misguided. Evidence included here suggests that any increase in such activity is dependent upon the type of event.

Events can perform other roles within a market town setting, especially those events that complement the characteristics of the host town. There is no doubt that events such as those examined in this chapter animate their host locations, even if just for a few hours, but policymakers should be cautious when attempting to create an artificial fit, especially if a successful event – whatever 'successful' may mean – is repeated in a location that appears to possess similar characteristics – at least superficially – as the venture may not be replicable. Although the framework proposed here requires further exploration it, nonetheless, provides initial focus for local policymakers and other decision makers to aid prioritisation of the reasons for wanting to implement an events-focused policy and second, to gain an understanding of likely consequences.

There are clearly challenges ahead for the towns included here; challenges that are replicated across the entire United Kingdom. Further insights may be gathered by extension of survey work beyond the south of England but the level to which attitudes and perceptions of events may have been altered by the Covid-19 pandemic is not known. This aspect increases the value of the current findings that were obtained via face-to-face interviews and interviewer-administered surveys.

An uncertain future adds another dimension to the existing complications. Although the current Government legislation on distancing and group gatherings is to be relaxed, there is no guarantee that tighter restrictions will not be reinstated should another Coronavirus outbreak emerge. However, those centres that possess the 'adaptive capacity and resilience' (Wrigley and Dolega 2011, 2358), as discussed earlier, may be in a better position to survive such turbulence. The ability to adapt events in accordance with the respective guidelines may be an additional factor to include in a refined framework. Thus, this research offers the potential for additional work in the context of Covid-19 recovery strategies.

Notes

- ¹ The project was mainly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) with TVBC (Test Valley Borough Council) acting as an industry sponsor, which was a condition of the ESRC funding.

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