Welland Market Town Partnership

First Impressions Survey

Introduction

The First Impressions survey was created for the sole purpose of gaining valuable feedback for each market town. Such information will help to inform and develop future decisions for the Welland Market Town Partnership.

The Process

A peer review process took place and each partnership member was designated a market town to review. The first Impression templates were prepared and distributed by South Kesteven District Council for each authority to complete.

- Stamford reviewed Oakham (and vice versa)
- Melton reviewed Oundle (and vice versa)

The template was designed with reference to the work prepared by the Association for Cities and Town Management with some additional features added with respect to the Welland area (attached as appendix 1). It was chosen to ensure each party were able to provide standardised insights and feedback. Often, communities and the residents have difficulty in developing an objective assessment of their strengths and limitations due to over familiarisation. The template and peer review process helps to eliminate concerns and develop common themes for each market town to examine.

Welland Market Towns

1. Overview

It was clear from the responses that the general impressions of all those who undertook the work was that the market towns already offered a good quality experience and the conclusions herein may only apply to some of the towns.

A compilation of the responses have been detailed below. Throughout the Welland Market Towns it has been noted that pedestrian areas and attractive inviting features stand out to visitors. Both Stamford and Oundle exhibit a town presence which is both "attractive and inviting". However, improvements must be made to ensure all towns can incorporate visually appealing shops. Oakham and Melton can both benefit by addressing their empty window displays and examining the floral arrangements within the town.

- From the information presented below, the main issue identifies shop fronts as a key priority.
- Improvements to the physical appearance also play a large part with opportunities to develop a longer lasting presence.
- Cleanliness and well maintained features will help to attract visitors to the area.

Melton

Good pedestrianised area

Lots of empty shops

Heritage trail hard to read

Empty hanging baskets

Oakham

Busy compacted town centre

Some shop fronts outdated

Neglected empty shops

Rutland in bloom could be developed further

Oundle

Very clean and welcoming

Attractive and inviting

Strong sense of pride

Good use of Town Trail

Stamford

Quirky use of advertisement

Inviting signage

Good pedestrianised area

Smart, pretty, relaxed feeling

2. Expectations

The Welland Towns exhibit strong:

- ✓ Heritage aspects / period features
- ✓ Links to food
- ✓ Traditional businesses and shops

Visitors link the Welland towns to the factors above. The expectations have been gathered through pre-visit online research and common knowledge. These comments help to frame each location and as such, any further marketing efforts would benefit from including these predominant features. Melton has always maintained a rich food offering with Stamford injecting picturesque heritage features. Oakham interlink old period areas with stone buildings and Oundle display small independent shops aligned with traditional town centre history.

Development opportunities include:

- ➢ Evident marketing to ensure these aspects are clearly identified within the public domain.
- ➢ Online presence to develop strong market town presence.

3. Social Media

Social media presence did not play a large part throughout the towns. Of the 4 towns, 2 had Wi-Fi provision and this had been provided through large chains. Therefore, there is still an opportunity to develop Wi-Fi from a local government perspective. In the surveys, many of the retailers are adapting and reaching new markets available through online shopping. The development of Facebook businesses and individual websites has opened up a platform to share information and sell goods. Local government working in partnership can develop these businesses by providing secure connections to Wi-Fi and developing networks to create prospering online businesses.

4. Online Activity

The level of online presence was varied throughout the towns. Oundle makes the most effective use of the opportunity available online. The excellent rating has been given due to the inclusive use of the Oundle Town council website. Other features include good signposting to the tourist information site, extensive detail and displaying a variety of place specific pictures.

Excellent ☑
Good ☐
Average ☐
Poor ☐

Both Oakham and Stamford had a good rating with an acceptable level of online presence available. The most useful website for Oakham (Discover Rutland) achieved a ranking of 4th in a Google search. Stamford received their rating due to the high volumes of positive reviews and good coverage over several sites.

Finally, the Melton offer was lacking detail and users must be prepared to search for specific information. The Council Website was lacking information which resulted in a score of poor.

Significant opportunities are available to develop sites to ensure customers are directed and signposted to relevant themes (highlighted in the expectations section). Online activity should be utilised to ensure potential visitors can access relevant information. Also of note would be the exclusion of the Welland Market town website from Google searches and council host sites. When undertaking simple searches for each of the towns (e.g. Oakham / Melton), the WMTP website does not appear unless specifically searched. Visitors are oblivious to the WMTP site and it is highly unlikely that first time visitor will be searching for e.g. Welland Stamford or Welland Oundle to find the WMTP website.

5. Positive Features

Melton	Oakham	Oundle	Stamford
• People • Pedestrianised • Parks • Range of shops and markets • Range of sporting facilities • Lots to do	• Busy high street • Heritage maintained • Good signage • Very accessible • Clean • Good mix of shopping	• Beautiful shop fronts • Market place • Town Trail • Church of St Peters • Hanging baskets • Warm welcome	• Traditional shop front • Good mix of shopping • Pedestrianised • Good mix of cafe/bars • Traditional signs • Cobbled streets

All of the positive features include common themes. Variety has been highlighted as a main pre-requisite of successful towns. Both Oakham, Stamford and Melton exhibit a wide variety of shopping activity whilst Oundle provides several heritage elements for individuals to take part. Along with this, positive aspects of the towns include good to high customer service

levels, traditional aspects such as the town / heritage being maintained and general cleanliness. Accessibility also plays a key part with pedestrian zones in Stamford and Melton. Oakham has good accessibility due to clear signage and Stamford exhibits traditional signs.

To maximise the pull of the Welland Towns, we must continue to develop our strengths. These include:

- ✓ Accessibility
- ✓ Heritage aspects
- ✓ Variety for visitors
- ✓ Clear directional signage

6. Initial Impressions

Heritage themes were the most predominant within this section and of the 4 surveys, 3 mentioned heritage aspects. Initial impressions focus on the cosmetic features of the towns and the comments included: green leafy surroundings, well maintained features (roundabouts) and Georgian buildings.

Therefore, the priority for all towns would be to ensure upkeep and maintenance of the following:

1. Green surroundings and floral displays
2. Heritage buildings
3. Journey into town

7. Parking

The parking found in towns was mixed. Oakham has a good variety of parking spaces both short stay and long stay. Stamford parking is often very busy and it would be well served if more parking could be made available. Short stay parking seemed to be the parking of choice in Melton and the long stay seemed a bit further than expected. Oundle exhibited a good level of free parking within the town centre and it was noted that directional signage within car parks were very helpful for first time visitors.

Lessons learnt would be the implementation of information boards and directional signage from car parks. It creates a user friendly town for first time visitors encouraging visits and developing familiarity.

8. Signage

Most highly rated was Oakham which exhibited clear regular signage to car parking and town centre locations. Oundle and Melton both scored well with good directions to car parking. However, commercial signage within Oundle could be improved with some designs not in keeping with the history and architecture of the town. Oakham had outdated shop signs in the town area which needed renewal. Stamford exhibited excellent "quirky" signs for their commercial businesses but fell short due to the limited signs available for the town centre.

To improve, clear guidance on signs within town centres would be useful to ensure displays are in keeping with the surrounding heritage. Also, clear directional signage in some of the towns would aid visitors.

9. Appearance / Business

The overall appearance for Stamford and Oundle promoted a pretty and relaxed atmosphere. However, Melton and Oakham towns would be helped along with more 'floral displays' to denote pride in the community. All the towns exhibited a good variety of independent, regional and national shops which was roughly split 40% / 30% / 30%. Business shop fronts were scrutinised in the appearance section and the main issue was to ensure shop fronts were in keeping with the character of the area. Many of the towns do this well, however the mix of national shops make this aspect difficult to control.

Areas of improvement should address the degree of empty shops in Melton and some in Oakham. Schemes such as pop-up shops or shop wraps could be explored to mask the affects. Also, with such historic towns, shop fronts will always be important to ensure businesses are in keeping with the tradition of the locality.
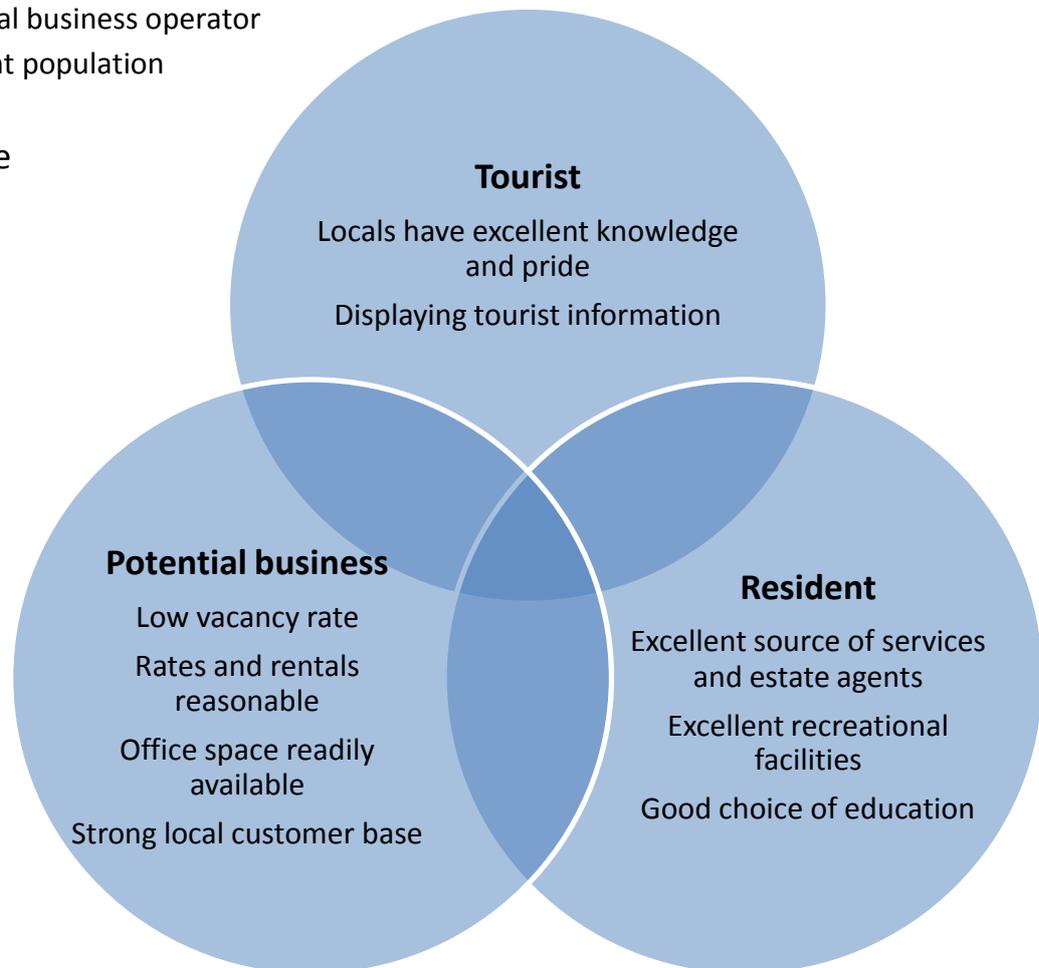
10. Actor Section

This section involved the surveyors to take on 3 different roles.

1. The tourist / first time visitor
2. Potential business operator
3. Resident population

❖ Oundle

Tourist

Locals have excellent knowledge and pride

Displaying tourist information

Potential business

Low vacancy rate

Rates and rentals reasonable

Office space readily available

Strong local customer base

Resident

Excellent source of services and estate agents

Excellent recreational facilities
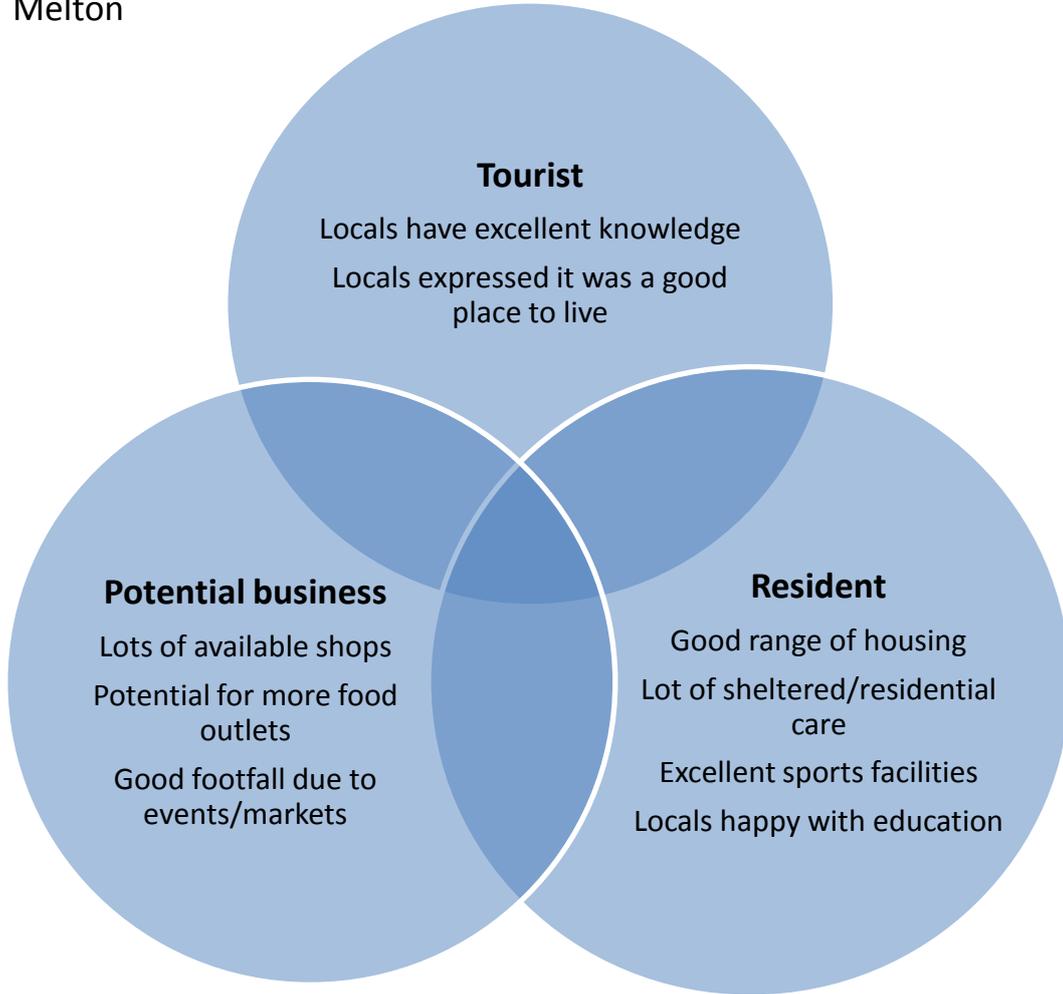
Good choice of education

Strong areas for Oundle include the tourist section which is informative for first time visitors. Aligning this with local knowledge has made Oundle a user friendly town to frequent. Potential businesses will find it somewhat difficult to enter Oundle due to the low vacancy rate but once within, the rates are conducive for trading with a good busy town signalling a wide customer base. Residents are well catered for with a variety of housing, family activities and good education links.

❖ Melton

Tourist

Locals have excellent knowledge

Locals expressed it was a good place to live

Potential business

Lots of available shops

Potential for more food outlets

Good footfall due to events/markets

Resident

Good range of housing

Lot of sheltered/residential care

Excellent sports facilities
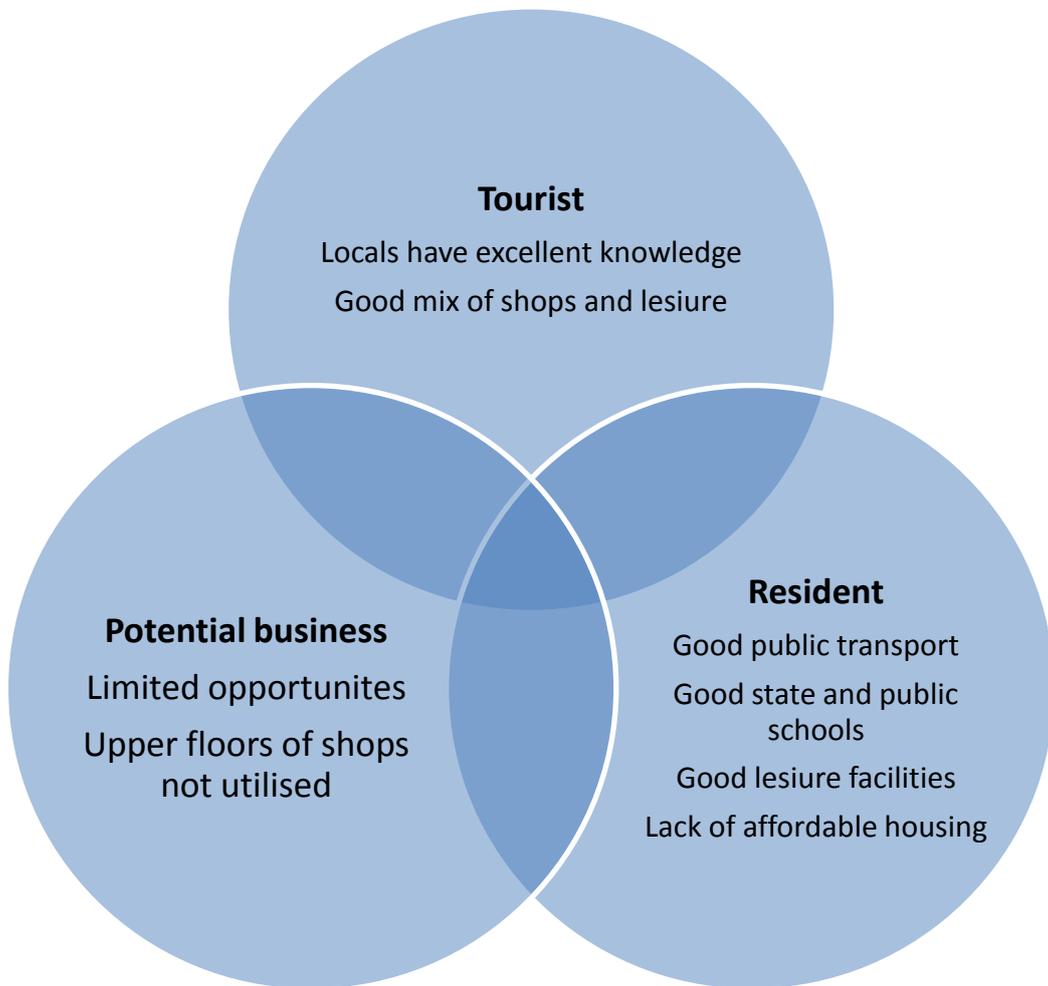
Locals happy with education

The tourist provision in Melton is strong with good local knowledge and community pride being shown during the visit. Potential businesses are well catered for due to the availability of empty shops and gap in the market for more food businesses. The resident population is well served with good sports facilities and a good level of care suitable for all ages.
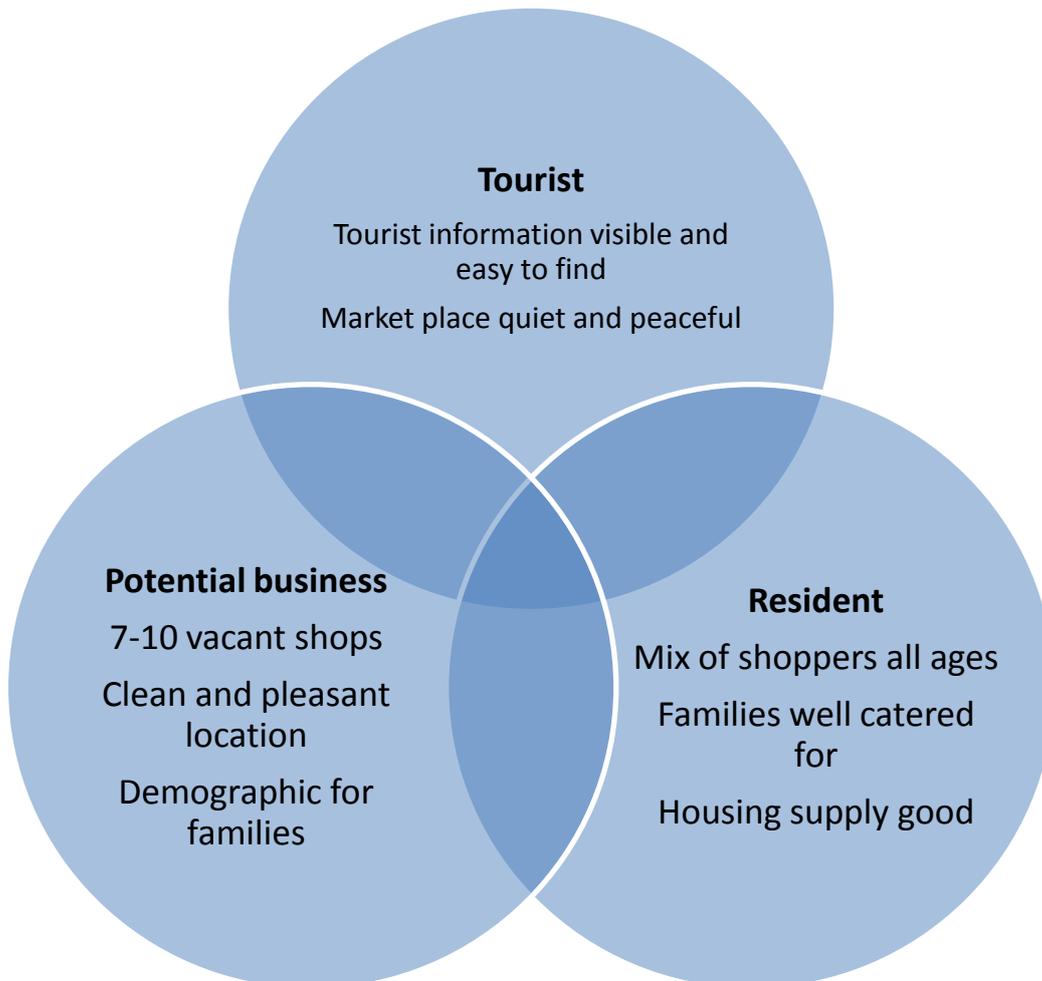
❖ Stamford

The town of Stamford scores most highly in the tourist and resident category. Tourists will have a wide range of shopping available along with good leisure facilities. The resident population have good transport, leisure activities and schools. However from a potential business operator view, the lack of premises available due to high occupancy rates would hamper efforts to establish new business. An area to examine would be to develop upper floors of shops for either offices or shop extensions. Other opportunities include a greater awareness for coach parking, drop off points and offers to support group tourism.

Tourist

Locals have excellent knowledge

Good mix of shops and lesiure

Potential business

Limited opportunites

Upper floors of shops not utilised

Resident

Good public transport

Good state and public schools

Good lesiure facilities

Lack of affordable housing

❖ Oakham

The Oakham town centre is a busy and bustling town with links to distinct heritage features. Positives include the Tourist Information Centre located in the middle of town. The Market Place in Oakham was quiet and peaceful during the visit which would suit visitors when frequenting the heritage areas of interest. Oakham has a variety of shopping for potential residents regardless of age and much of the family population would be well served in the Oakham area. Other positives include a good housing supply. A potential business operator would be well suited with +7 empty shops in the town centre and Oakham should see a growth in new businesses for the future. When taking into account the family demographic and location, businesses can develop a wide customer base.

Tourist

Tourist information visible and easy to find

Market place quiet and peaceful

Potential business

7-10 vacant shops

Clean and pleasant location

Demographic for families

Resident

Mix of shoppers all ages

Families well catered for

Housing supply good

11. Areas for Improvement

Melton	Oakham	Oundle	Stamford
• Empty shops neglected • Lack of colour • Unused hanging baskets • Confusing road system	• Stronger USP • Dated shop fronts • Unkept empty shops • Lack of floral displays within town centre	• Long stay car park signage • Events board in market • No arrival signage	• St Johns traffic • Limited signage to Meadows • Limited signs to bus station • Cleanliness • Limited use on upper floors

The areas for improvement across the board for the Welland towns signify 3 main features:

- ✘ Signage
- ✘ Shop fronts
- ✘ Improvement to public realm

Signage within and around the towns need to be developed to ensure first time visitors can frequent the town autonomously. Due to over familiarization, we often navigate through the towns with reliance on our individual compass and are unaffected by the restraints of first time visitors. Therefore, to ensure visitors can reach town attractions and central locations easier, a variety of signs can be implemented (see recommendation section)

Shop fronts have also been a problem in the towns either due to neglected empty units or outdated frontages. Although change could be seen as incremental, the impact made on first time visitors would be substantial. First Impressions are only made once and in order to capture the audience of visitors, the outcome must always be carefully managed. See recommendations for ideas to improve shop fronts.

Improvements to the public realm are an important part of the towns and a majority of the locations have floral displays and planters. However, the continued use of these has diminished and the authorities/businesses should be encouraged to use the surrounding opportunities more effectively. The cost for implementation is minimal; however the impact on the town is significant.

The areas for attention below align with the areas for improvement above. However, other areas to be aware of include errant parking in the town centre and ensuring due care and attention for disabled visitors.

Ideas to share	Areas for attention
• Postivity of shop keepers • Pedestrian zones • Variety of markets • Enhanced town centre frontage linked to heritage • Compact retail area	• More visually attractive • Smarten up empty shops • Signage for car park • Parking on pavements • Hanging baskets/planters • Disabled persons access guide

12. Ideas to share

Some of the ideas to steal include larger scale projects such as pedestrian zones however much of what can be achieved can be developed through local authority work. Shop Front Improvement Schemes can be implemented to align shop fronts with heritage features, markets can be developed intensively to build variety and more could be done to publicize our retail offering.

13. Conclusions

The conclusions from the survey have identified 4 key areas for improvement which are:

- ✓ Signage
- ✓ Shop fronts and heritage features
- ✓ Improvements to the Public Realm
- ✓ Online presence.

These issues have been repeated throughout the comments and notes taken during the First Impressions survey and therefore warrant recommendations to improve the area.

- ▪ Signage

Much of the signage into town was exemplary and most of the road networks were easy to navigate. However, the problem arose due to directional signage once first time visitors had arrived. With no mapping system of the town tourists would be unaware of specific locations and efforts to improve this have been outlined below.

Information Boards

Developing information boards for larger capacity car parks would aid the journey into town for visitors. Often, initial directions and movement into town can be difficult and as such the information boards would help to establish a mental reference.

Signposts

Another comment revealed the difficulty when moving around the town. Visitors are still unable to determine where points of interest can be found and signposts would be useful in smaller car parks and prominent central places. Signposts can be created to be unobtrusive whilst still being able to keep with the heritage features of the town.

- ▪ Shop Fronts / Heritage Features

Some of the shop fronts were outdated which made it difficult to align with the heritage features around the town. Furthermore, empty shops were neglected and often seemed out of character with the rest of the town. The recommendations below help to restore the balance of the town in a variety of ways.

Shop wraps

Often, empty shops leave a large gap in the town and works against the character of the area. Therefore, developing shop wraps with organizations and the estate agents will help to mask the detrimental void left as a result. The shop display shown here served as an advertisement and read: 'This space could be yours'.

Shop Displays

Working closely with letting agents and estate agents will help to develop stronger relationships. This can develop into shop displays with a variety of organizations or events. Shop displays are inexpensive and can often link to the heritage of an area turning empty shops into local promotion and events.

(Picture above) Former Body Shop being used for a temporary photographic exhibition.

Shop Front Improvement schemes

 To ensure that our heritage can be preserved within the town centre areas, shop frontages will play a key part in determining the general impression of an area. Schemes such as the Shop Front Improvement will help to boost local community pride, establish market towns as a destination to visit and develop links with the business community.

Before

After

14

Improvements to the Public Realm

The areas open to the public have all received high praise. However, many of the reviews noticed that the planters and hanging baskets were unused. By investing small amounts into flower displays would help to refine the public areas and inject colour. Overall the small volume of input would yield distinct differences in overall impressions.

Our general maintenance has also been very high with many of the towns being praised for general cleanliness. To promote public pride, the heritage trails need to be carefully maintained to ensure signs and boards have not been weathered away over time.

Online Presence

The WMTP website has not been optimised for search engines. Therefore place specific searches such as 'Stamford' will not highlight the WMTP website. The website will only be picked up on the search engine systems when the words 'Welland Market Town Stamford' has been entered. For unknowing visitors, the WMTP website would be extremely difficult to source when undertaking an initial search. Therefore, Search Engine Optimisation must be undertaken for the WMTP website if we are to continue promoting the Welland Towns effectively.

Promotion of the market towns should be centered on our 3 key features which are:

✓ Heritage aspects / period features
✓ Traditional businesses and shops
✓ Links to food

Therefore, developing marketing around these strong and unique themes will reinforce the message that we are open to all visitors. The principles and legacy of the WMTP are strong and the group should seek to promote this intensively to the public.