

TASTE OF THE TOWN COMPANY

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2009-2012

1 Summary

- 1.1 The Company is pursuing funding for four inter-related projects. The first is to develop the food connection network and the Tern Valley Food and Countryside Festival and the second is a bid to develop the Tern Valley Countryside Project to realise the heritage and opportunities inherent in the countryside for the local population and for visitors. The third is to redesign the web site to create a tool for communication. The fourth is to integrate the projects in such a way as to generate a rural community identity and provide a prototype for Rural Community Development elsewhere.

2 Background

- 2.1 In the past, people from the farms and villages brought their produce into town. The market was a meeting place and the heart of the rural community. Market Drayton is now at risk of both losing its traditional role as the hub of rural activity and of becoming little more than a Service Centre for a disconnected population.
- 2.2 The Company seeks to restore vitality to the rural community by reconnecting people with the land and with each other, in ways that makes sense. It proposes measures to develop a sustainable way of life for the modern rural community by connecting people up, stimulating local activity and realising the potential of the countryside as an asset to the population and as an attraction to visitors. The target is a quality of life different from, but commensurate with, the best of urban living.
- 2.3 The Taste of the Town Company is a not for profit one, run by volunteers. It was established in 2000 and has played a key role in local economic and educational initiatives. It has a successful record in delivering projects and engaging with other organisations. The Company is a network of individuals with no real assets other than its reputation and local goodwill. In 2008, the Company reached the point where its aspirations outgrew the capacity to achieve them. This Strategy is intended to guide the Company's direction over the medium term and support future bids for investment.

3 The Taste of the Town Local Food & Countryside Festival Project

- 3.1 The Company was formed to promote local connections with food and drink in order to achieve economic, social and educational benefit for people living and working in Market Drayton and the surrounding countryside. It established the food connection network, a person centred website that enables members to tell the story of their connections with local food on its pages. The intention is to add value to local food by making the connection a personal one and to facilitate networking between members who would not otherwise be connected. The virtual community that is created is potentially more open and inclusive than any real time rural community. The food connection network offers a low cost facility for individuals to promote their activities directly on the web. The Company has staged 5 biennial Taste of the Town exhibitions with associated events (one in 1999 before formation of company); these included a Big Breakfast of local produce to 1000 secondary school children at the Grove School. The Company is currently working with 5 primary schools to encourage them to "grow their own menu" in the school grounds. Funds will be sought to develop a Tern Valley Food and Countryside Festival in Market Drayton and make this an annual event. The enterprise has now grown to the point where there is both a market opportunity and a social need for this Festival. It will raise the level of awareness of the importance of local food - not just to help local producers, but to draw the local community together around a universal interest and demonstrate the health and environmental benefits of growing and sourcing food more locally.

- 3.2 The Company will need to recruit a part-time Project Officer to develop and promote the Tern Valley Food and Countryside Festival for a two year period 2009-2011. The worker will seek opportunities to extend the market for local food within the Tern Valley and beyond by the collective promotion of local produce and opportunities. The Company expects that, after two years, the Tern Valley Food and Countryside Festival and street market will be self-sustaining through income generated by the hire of stalls, sponsorship and ticket sales from related events.

4 The Tern Valley Countryside Project

- 4.1 The Company proposes that people living and working in the locality are reconnected with the town and the rural hinterland in two separate but related ways.

- 4.2 The key is to consider the locality as an entity. The Tern Valley Countryside Project extends from the source in the Maer Hills and follows the River Tern. It is defined by: the Upper Catchment Area of the River Tern and includes the parishes of Loggerheads and Maer (Staffordshire) and the Shropshire parishes of Adderley, Cheswardine, Childs Ercall, Hinstock, Hodnet, Ightfield, Moreton Corbet and Lee Brockhurst, Market Drayton, Moreton Saye, Norton in Hales, Shawbury, Stanton Upon Hine, Stoke Upon Tern, Sutton Upon Tern, Weston Under Redcastle and Woore. The parishes are, themselves, part of a wider pattern of settlements across North Shropshire and South Cheshire.

- 4.3 The first objective is to engage local people and visitors in exploring the story of changes in the relationship between the countryside and in the lives of the community that farmed and settled in the upper reaches of the River Tern. This story will be told through a series of thematic interpretations/events based at sites in the locality. The sites will offer a combination of information and real time experience. Each presentation will tell of past, present and possible future change. Potential themes are:

- The countryside at work: The story of farms and farming located at Fordhall Farm. It will also identify a farming trail including accompanied visits to the livestock market.
- A history of rural transport and communications at a site located alongside the Shropshire Union Canal.
- The countryside at war located at Blore Heath Farm the site of a key battle in the War of the Roses and including guided visits to RAF Shawbury.
- Understanding the natural environment. To be located at various sites and be supported by guided walks and drives across the locality as well as family based activities such as pond dipping and bug hunting.
- The story of rural life as told in the Market Drayton Museum and through guided walks and drives.

A plan will be developed with owners of potential sites for accessing and maintaining the information including funding proposals.

- 4.4 A second objective is to identify, access and promote a range of opportunities for countryside activities. Suggested activities include:

- Making use of the ambience of the countryside to promote health and well being
- Diverting troubled and troublesome young people from crime by encouraging them to care for the land and its produce and animals, and engaging in positive activities such as fishing.
- Improving the local economy by promoting local markets, retail opportunities and publicity materials for products, services and events associated with the local countryside.
- Identifying, interpreting and accessing key features of the landscape and settlements.
- Offering subject linked school visits and guided educational activities.

- Identifying a number of leisure activities and access negotiated to a range of rural activities. Identifying walks, cycle routes and car routes and the infrastructure needed to support them. Sports and recreation opportunities, including, for example, coaching for angling. Picnic sites.
- Countryside events will be supported and a list of village and church fetes published and promoted.
- At least one Arts project will be established that promotes the local countryside.
- develop and pilot a schedule of volunteering opportunities, work experiences and training drawn from placements across the locality. The immediate target is to strengthen CVs of young people through customised programmes. This is critical at a time of fewer job opportunities

The concept is to offer both an understanding of the development of the modern rural community and an experience of the opportunities presently afforded by the location.

Site information will be provided on the internet and at each location. It will be inter linked with self guided tours. Signage and content to be agreed and in place.

- 4.5 The Company will need to recruit a project worker to scope the opportunities within the locality to explore the story of changes in rural life and in the landscape and to bring forward proposals and priorities for development. The worker will also be expected to identify, access, develop and promote activities that will enhance the present and future countryside experience, on offer to residents and visitors alike. The Company expects that, after two years, the Project will have identified, accessed and brought together various sites and activities across the upper reaches of the River Tern and established a local work group of providers, residents and visitor interests to continue the development of the Project.

5 Information Technology and the Modern Rural Community

- 5.1 The Company believes it is essential to redevelop their web site and enhance the quality and frequency of electronic communications.
- 5.2 When first designed in 2000, the “foodconnection” was intended to identify individuals as part of a virtual community and showcase their local connections with food and their other interests. It was intended to ‘wire’ members up and encourage interactions that would spark new initiatives. Experience now suggests that new initiatives are more likely to be identified and driven by the Board than by members searching among colleagues for new opportunities.
- 5.3 Times have moved on. There is now substantial literature on business development on the internet and some of the ideas embrace the principles of the Company in personalisation and adding value to products and services by associating them with linked experiences.
- 5.4 The website needs to be redesigned to reflect more closely the traditional strengths of a rural community. These include:
- 5.4.1 The strength of rural communities traditionally lies in their social and economic connectivity.

By blurring the boundaries between the Projects, the Company can recognise the complexity and strength of the Company network. These include: members of the foodconnection; those who represent the statutory, voluntary organisations and businesses involved in the Tern Valley Food and Countryside Festival; providers, local residents and visitors currently engaged in countryside activities and those potentially engaged with the Tern Valley Countryside Project,

- 5.4.2 A further strength of the rural community was the local knowledge of how to get things done. People knew whom they were talking to and they knew what they could ask of them.

The website carries member information and details of local activities and events. It was designed to mobilise the collective intelligence within the virtual community when requested. This has only worked in a limited way and there is a need to structure the system around the change process and problem solving initiatives rather than the series of predetermined categories as at present. The use of information technology also shortens the time-scale from concept to delivery and provides near continuous information between those involved. Moreover, the boundaries around the community are porous to external ideas and to the talent pool that lies beyond the locality.

- 5.4.3 Another strength of the traditional rural community was often the incidental benefits that accrued from interactivity between members. These strengthened the ties between members and contributed to the sustainability of the community.

The Company deliberately set out to provide a low cost service eschewing such tangibles as office accommodation in favour of intangibles such as electronic information, personal contact, co-operation and commitment. However the move to the employment of staff will mean that capital and revenue costs will rise. It is important, therefore, that the intangibles remain a feature of the offers and exchanges made between members and site visitors.

- 5.5 The Company will work with an IT partner to develop the site. Funding will be sought for the site development over a period of 2 years. After this time the technology will be in place to facilitate self maintenance of the web pages and to deliver electronic communications at minimum cost.

6 Shaping a modern rural community. A community Development Project.

- 6.1 The projects combine to tell the changing story of the community that settled in the Tern Valley. The land is still farmed, local produce sold and the town characterised by its livestock and street markets. However the economic, social and technological changes wrought on the people and the landscape over generations, have diffused the sense of community. The strategy is to encourage those who presently live and work there to engage with the projects and with each other and in doing so assume their identity as part of the continuing story of life in the Tern Valley. Whether they are economic migrants working in the food factories, pilots on training courses, young people in prison, church ministers or bank clerks on career postings; soldiers back from distant wars, shop keepers or teachers. Whether they live in a rented flat or own a country house. All have a place in the life of the modern rural community. A community that extends back into history and reaches across the world.
- 6.2 The cohesion of the Projects is reinforced by the fact that the area described as the River Tern Countryside includes all the parishes within the remit of the Market Drayton and Shawbury Local Area Joint Committee (part of the new Shropshire Unitary Authority) with the addition of two adjoining parishes in Staffordshire.
- 6.3.1 The Company will work with Partners to grow the economic, social, environmental, health and educational opportunities for the people who live and work in the Tern Valley and support a local infra-structure to help achieve these.

7. How we are different

- 7.1 There are a number of food related festivals in Shropshire and Cheshire. There are also monthly farmers markets of varying quality. Our proposal is very competitive and builds on the experience of staging the Taste of the Town Exhibition as a community development event. The Company can tell the story of food from gate to plate within the compass of the locality. It will offer a blend of rural history, environmental information, countryside activity and local food delivered on a person to person basis. The associated website is unique in its personal approach and will be re-organised to reach out across the community in order to generate new ideas and address local problems. There is no other project developing and demonstrating the dynamic model of a modern rural community. The focus of individual projects tends to overlook the potential benefits of a shared identity with the locality and with each other.

The proposals are a response to our local experience and the demand for our activities. Given the economic downturn, it is timely to be advancing the case for projects that build the capacity to maximise local advantage and sustainability. The Company is also intent on enabling members of the rural community to exploit the anticipated economic upturn in three years time, by offering a programme of work experience/volunteer placements and training to people looking to enhance their CV.

- 7.2 The proposals meets local need identified within the following strategies:
Local Area Agreement (N1005) to improve satisfaction with the local Area.
Shropshire Partnership. Contribute to sustainable communities by preserving and enhancing Shropshire natural environment and landscape and improving access to places and facilities. Create activities for healthier communities and improve opportunities for older people and reduce health inequality. Make the best use of culture and leisure opportunities and support the voluntary sector.
North Shropshire Partnership. Increase the number of residents who have a good knowledge of, and information about, the availability, range and amount of activities in the rural locality and understand the built and natural heritage all around them. Increase the number of people leading healthy life styles, safe walking and healthy eating.
Shropshire County Council Tourism Policy. The focus for Northern Shropshire is on landscape, including waterways and gardens, and includes reinforcing the sense of place and discovery walks.
Better Welcome SWOT Analysis for Market Drayton. Local distinctiveness: history, culture, heritage; local produce and countryside environment.

8 Marketing the Projects

- 8.1 The Company has long established relations with the local press and media and access to members own publicity arrangements.

9 The Teams Skills

- 9.1 The Company will seek initial funding for the posts of a part time Tern Valley Food and Countryside Festival Project Worker and a part time Tern Valley Countryside Project Worker. These posts to both run for two years and will be supported by officers of the Company, who are all volunteers. Funds are also sought for the development of the website. Further consideration needs to be given to the ways in which the dynamic model of a rural community can be promoted.
- 9.2 The Project Workers will be managed by a steering committee drawn from the Company Board and co-opted members. Members of the Company have professional experience in managing projects and the Company has an excellent record on delivery. A nominated Board member will co-ordinate the website development with the activities of the Project Workers. Responsibility for the

promotion of the dynamic model of a modern rural community will be designated to the Chairman.

- 9.3 Whilst there are four separate Projects, the advantages of a shared support infrastructure is recognised.
- 9.4 The Company is seeking experienced staff with excellent organisational and social skills and an ability to capture the imagination of potential members. Administrative and computing skills are required to maintain records of contact and an expanding database and to produce press releases.
- 9.5 It is anticipated that, within the duration of the Projects, a pattern of local activities and opportunities will be established, and local volunteers will lead subsequent developments. The Company anticipates that at least half of future funding will be raised from members directly benefiting from the activities as well as from local sponsors and fund raising events.

10 Risk Analysis

- 10.1 That potential partners are unwilling to pursue a thematic approach.
This is minimised by engagement of potential partners from the outset. The Company has strong local participation. It has a good track record in bringing parties together in low cost co-operative ventures and promoting local food production and consumption. This will maximise local sustainability.
- 10.2 That the Company has not the experience to deliver projects involving paid staff.
The Company has excellent record in partnership working and providing local leadership and draws on substantial experience amongst its members in various managerial capacities. Arrangements will be made to outsource the payment of wages through a partner organisation.
- 10.3 That the market for local food and related activities has stalled with the economic downturn.
The Company offers personal information and an emotional dimension to the goods and services provided. These are the intangibles. Buying local food is buying from someone individuals know about and can contact directly. It is personal. It is also buying into the countryside experience and returning customers become part of the expanding community. The on-line newsletters support the sense of belonging and reinforce customer loyalty and identity. Exchanges between producers/service providers and users inform the way that the Company determines and designs its activities.
- 10.4 That the Company is a new style of organisation which is different and remains to be tested against more traditional models.
The model of a Company as a network is supported by literature describing advancements in using the internet to build a new style platform to generate activity. The Company is innovative and is process driven. It is, therefore, less suited to meeting predetermined targets than in supporting its members to new achievements. The recent interest of funding bodies, in moving beyond performance targets to consider benefits to the community, will be helpful to the Company bid.

11 Monitoring and Evaluation

Feedback will be gathered in a variety of ways. Those providing activities, products or services will complete their own customer evaluation forms. Comments will be invited from members and visitors to events and discussion of the strategy will be sought at locally organised meetings. There will be a discussion forum on the website. The Projects are community development ones and the recruitment and engagement of members will be recorded. The Company anticipates that indications of satisfaction

with the local area, sought by the various authorities, will reflect the more general perception.

12. **Costings and delivery schedule**

We are looking for the equivalent of two part-time time workers and associated costs, over a two year period and additional funding for the IT developments. The posts may be run concurrently, and work might proceed in stages. We are hoping to discuss costings and delivery schedules with possible funders in due course.

Please note that this Strategy was approved in principle by the ToTT Co. Board on January 20 2009 and is now out for consultation. Comments and suggestions to info@foodconnection.co.uk by March 16 please.

We welcome observations from contacts outside the Company.