ELSEVIER

Journal of Rural Studies 20 (2004) 405–418

JOURNAL OF RURAL STUDIES

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Exploring the current and future role of market towns in servicing their hinterlands: a case study of Alnwick in the North East of England

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Abstract

Faced with the problems of access, distance and low population density, the provision of quality services to rural areas is inherently difficult. Although the role of market towns in alleviating problems in the provision of rural services has been given little consideration within the academic literature, they are currently being targeted by UK government policy. Using a case of the hinterland of Alnwick, a market town in the North East of England, this paper explores the current and future role of market towns in servicing their hinterlands. The results suggest a mutual dependence between market town services and hinterland residents and that the continuation of this relationship depends on market towns taking advantage of demographic trends in rural areas. Faced with changing demographics and the wider use of the Internet, potential is identified for 'clawing-back' trade from larger urban areas and creating an enhanced role for market towns. Extending the sense of belonging beyond the boundaries of the town itself will also be important in increasing patronage of town services.

Keywords: Rural service provision; Rural hinterland; Market towns

1. Introduction

Although the provision of quality and locally accessible services within rural areas is inherently difficult, increased commuting and in-migration (Champion et al., 1998; Findlay et al., 2001), raised consumer expectations (service and quality) and pressures to reap economies of scale (Cloke, 1983) have also contributed to the decline in the availability of rural services within small settlements. As the delivery of most services to rural residents has gravitated up the settlement hierarchy,[1] small towns have not been isolated from its affects (Guy, 1990). A continuation of these trends is likely to reduce the availability of services within villages and market towns, resulting in the loss of rural employment and may also have implications in terms of the social balance of such rural communities (Moseley, 2000a).

The decline of village services has been detailed elsewhere (Higgs and White, 1997; Moseley, 2000a; Countryside Agency, 2001a). However, the role of market towns within rural service provision has been given less consideration, where market towns are defined in terms of their common capacity to act as a focal point for trade and services for a hinterland (Swain, 1997; Countryside Agency, 2000; MAFF and DETR, 2000). Despite the lack of research into the role of market towns in alleviating problems in the provision of rural services, they are currently being targeted by UK government policy as centres for service provision and growth (MAFF and DETR, 2000), with relevant government bodies establishing a funding stream that

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[1] Houston (2003) illustrates that not all services have been moving up the settlement hierarchy in recent years.

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doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2004.07.003

has helped a number of market towns to identify their needs and priorities for regeneration (One North East, 2002).

Although it has been suggested that market towns play an important role in servicing their hinterlands (MAFF and DETR, 2000), it is unclear what form this takes and upon which factors the role depends. There is also likely to be a mutual dependence, where the viability of the services themselves are dependent upon trade from hinterland residents and where many of these residents, particularly the less mobile, may also rely on such services within or from their nearest town. The future prospects for market town services will depend on the continuation of such a relationship. However, little is known about the attitudes and preferences of hinterland residents towards market town services and upon what factors their use of such services depend. A better understanding of these issues would enable market towns to plan for the future and cope with the likely effect of future trends in demography, mobility and Internet usage. Using questionnaire surveys of visitors and hinterland residents, as well as focus group discussions, these issues are explored within this paper for Alnwick, a market town in the North East of England. The results provide a substantial body of evidence from which useful policy recommendations are made.

2. Market towns and rural service provision

2.1. Defining the services considered

Given the range of services accessed by hinterland residents, some clarification of terminology is required. Suppliers provide many services directly to those living within rural areas, whether they are piped/cabled to the household (electricity, water, sewerage, landline telephone, etc.), transmitted to the area (television, mobile phone services) or delivered at the street/village level but from a 'remote' depot/branch office (policing, road maintenance, refuse collection, street lighting, etc.). This study focuses on self-accessed services, where it is necessary for the 'customer' to travel to a fixed location outlet to access the service. Examples include health care and retail services. It was hypothesised that, for self-accessed services, the location of provision is likely to be most relevant to hinterland residents and to the research objectives detailed above.[2]

2.2. Market towns as service providers to smaller rural settlements

Faced with the problems of access, distance and low population density, some compromise is required between the geographical spread of services provided, their quality and cost of provision (Moseley, 2000a).[3] Attempting to meet this challenge through a permanent establishment at the village-level may only be feasible for a few key services, for example, the post office, a meeting place, a public house and a primary school. Market towns may provide an acceptable compromise for a range of services, where the town catchment may be sufficiently large to allow economies of scale and a degree of specialisation. Distances may also be manageable such that public transport links can be provided to its hinterland. For a range of services, combining market town provision with sustained public transport links may satisfy both the towns themselves and their hinterlands. Provision within larger urban areas may lead to the exclusion of a minority of rural residents.

Davies et al. (1998) have illustrated the service role of market towns within the hierarchy of settlements in Western Victoria, Australia, where a cumulatively increasing range of commercial services are provided at each level. Enhancing and maintaining this role for the future depends on providing access to the market towns for those without cars and 'clawing back' those that travel further afield for their services. Through the consideration of the factors affecting the use of market town services by hinterland residents, the potential for market towns is explored.

2.3. Factors affecting the use of market town services

2.3.1. Accessibility

A key issue affecting the service role of market towns is accessibility, defined in terms of proximity to local services, residential location and mobility (Moseley, 1979). Although the high levels of car ownership within rural areas ensure the feasibility of market towns to provide service destinations, it also enables rural residents to travel further afield in order to gain higher quality services. In terms of health or school services, accessibility issues may be such that there is little choice beyond the rural area of residence.[4] Physical distance may be less of a discouragement for services infrequently used and accessed during the day, with non-food retail providing perhaps the most obvious example. Indeed,

[2]An exception was within Shilbottle, a village included within the focus group analysis, where a consensus was reached that youth crime was a key priority for improvement. The village is policed from Alnwick, with regular patrols by car. It was suggested that such visits tended to be at similar times and coming from the same direction enabling the youths be absent at those times or run off when the police car approaches. A continual presence once provided by the village policeman was felt to have been lost, along with the threat of surprise.

[3]Powe and Whitby (1994), for example, demonstrate the cost of providing a range of services is greatest for areas with the lowest population density.

[4]For example, general practitioners in large urban areas may be reluctant to accept patients where the call out distance would be unacceptable. Alternatively, regarding schools, the 'commuting' time to a given school may be disruptive of a child's upbringing.

Guy (1990) has shown increased car access to better enable residents of small towns to shop in larger urban areas ('out-shopping') and this is reflected in trends towards increased concentration of retail activity into large centres. For example, in England, 75% of comparison sales (such as fashion and gifts) are now in the top 200 retail centres compared to 50% in the early 1980s (English Market Towns Advisory Forum, 2002).

For those limited in terms of their mobility, there is likely to remain a dependence upon village and market town services, with lower service levels in hinterlands making transport links to market towns and/or outreach services essential. Rural bus services can be limited. For example, in the UK, in the late 1990s only 16% of rural UK households were within 6 min walk of a bus service operating at a frequency of 30 min or less (DETR, 1999), with demand falling due to increased car ownership (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). Based on the results of Lovett et al. (2002, 2003), it is expected that those using the bus service to access market towns in the UK will only be located in larger villages and other towns. Indeed, Moseley (1996) found scheduled bus services to be largely irrelevant for most of the disadvantaged target group because of their infrequency and lack of door-to-door convenience. Investigating the accessibility of rural services for elderly and young groups (previously recognised to have little access to private cars), Williams and White (2001) found car sharing to be common, explaining a disparity between complaints regarding public transport and access to services.

2.3.2. Quality of services

The quality of services provided may be a key factor in selecting where to obtain self-accessed services. In terms of visits to the general practitioner or school services, it is perhaps debatable whether there is an urban/market town quality difference. Regarding retailing, however, the higher quality of service provided in urban centres is perhaps a key motivation for the 'bypassing' of market town centres by those with cars. However, as argued above, due to the frequency of purchase, physical distance is likely to be more of a deterrent for food shopping, suggesting a greater potential to 'claw back' trade from large urban areas. Furthermore, through careful sitting within market towns, supermarkets at least have the potential to provide an important 'anchor' for other services provided within the towns (DETR, 1998; Collis et al., 2000). Likewise, for evening entertainment, the deterrent of a late journey back from a larger urban area may also provide opportunities for market town centres to 'claw-back' trade (e.g. clubs, restaurants, cinemas and theatres).

2.3.3. Resident characteristics

The future service requirements of rural areas will depend on the characteristics of their residents. Car ownership has already been discussed. A further issue is the location of employment, where the linkages with patronage of town centre services have been previously considered by Pinkerton et al. (1995) in the US; Civic Trust (2000) and Findlay et al. (2001) in the UK. The findings of these studies suggest that, where people work affects the extent to which they 'out-shop'. A further important characteristic may be whether residents are retired. Although as they grow older their ability and will to access services further afield is likely to decline, retired rural residents are likely to have more time to travel. Findlay et al. (2001) found the relationship between those retired and 'out-shopping' to be only present for incomers, who are more likely to have links with urban areas. Such in-migrants from urban areas may also bring with them greater expectations of the services they require and place new demands on their market towns, the fulfilment of which may benefit the local economy.

3. Government policy and the case of Alnwick and its hinterland

The response of the Government to the decline in rural services has been one of attempting to set minimum standards of provision, taking advantage of new developments in information and communication technology, supporting and encouraging tandem/joint operations within the villages, regeneration of market towns and public/community transport links to and from rural areas (Moseley, 2000b; Robinson, 2003; DEFRA, 2002). Although financial support/subsidy is available for some schemes, there is an emphasis on community based initiatives, voluntarism and self-help (Moseley, 2003).

Local authorities are key actors within the provision of rural services, for example, controlling the budgets for health and educational services. They also play an important role through strategic planning and development control. More recently, the Market Town Initiative has become a key vehicle for the improvement in rural services, which is based on a partnership between the Countryside Agency, working through regional divisions, and the regional development agencies. Of relevance here, is the prerequisite for funding within the Market Town Initiative of some form of joint working with rural hinterland residents. However, Caffyn (2004) reports that, for political reasons or a reluctance to spread scare funding over a wider area, in some towns, partners often did not perceive a need to involve their rural hinterlands. Likewise, Caffyn (2004) also reports difficulties of attracting active participation from rural areas and insufficient time to develop this involvement within the process.

In the North East of England, 13 towns are participating in the Market Town Initiative. With the guidance of the Countryside Agency, each of these towns have performed 'health checks' (Countryside Agency, 2002a, b) and formulated action plans. Alnwick is one of the 13 towns involved in the Market Town Initiative and the objectives of its health check and action plan (www.alnwick.gov.uk) cover a wide range of issues including improving services within the town.

Alnwick, with a population of approximately 8000, serves a dominantly rural hinterland (it is the largest town in the district of 31 000 population) and holds sway in a sub-region between the other market towns of Morpeth and Berwick upon Tweed, with the city of Newcastle upon Tyne within an hour's drive. Fig. 1 shows the location of Alnwick within Britain and, more locally, the close proximity of the smaller towns of Wooler, Rothbury and Amble. Tourism is important to the local economy, with Alnwick castle (now of Harry Potter fame) and water gardens being key visitor magnets. Reflecting tourism trends, retailing within the town has seen a marked change over the last 20 yr, moving away from the provision of comparison goods, for example, electrical, furniture, clothing, to shops more reflecting the needs of the tourists. However, at the time of the study, three major shops were observed to be closed, two of them boarded up in prominent locations within the town centre. There also remains controversy over a planning application to provide a second major supermarket within the town. Typical of many other rural areas in England, Alnwick district has an ageing population and has a higher proportion of car ownership when compared to national figures (Population Census, 2001).

4. Methodology

As noted above, this paper considers four key issues, namely

- the extent of mutual dependence between market town services and hinterland residents;
- the current role of market towns in servicing their hinterlands and the factors upon which this role depends;
- the attitudes and preferences of hinterland residents towards the use of market town services; and
- how market towns services can be maintained in the face of current trends in demography, mobility and Internet usage.

In order to gain a detailed understanding of these issues, data was collected in three-stages using both questionnaire surveys and focus group discussions. Although the use of multiple methods of data collection has great potential to improve understanding, it is necessary to be aware of the comparative strengths and weakness of these data.[5] Questionnaire surveys were conducted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Such data provide an indication of the relative importance of the issues to market town visitors and hinterland residents. These data also provide the opportunity to perform statistical analysis in terms of cross-tabulations between respondent groupings and more sophisticated techniques, such as regression analysis. Focus groups largely provide qualitative data and involve small numbers of respondents. This method is useful as it allows deliberation and discussion amongst the participants and, as such, provides a more detailed understanding of the issues considered.

4.1. Stage 1

In order to explore the extent of mutual dependence between market town services and hinterland residents, a questionnaire survey of town centre visitors was undertaken in February and June 2001 and 2002, with 432 usable questionnaires being completed. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face within the town centre, with selection based on the 'next-to-pass'. The interviewers visited the towns on a normal weekday, a market day during the week and on Saturday. Although the questionnaire survey resulted a great deal of information on the use of Alnwick services, as the survey was undertaken within the market town rather than the place of residence of respondents, it is unclear to what extent the hinterland sub-sample of the market town visitors was representative of the hinterland residents. As such, the results of this survey were confined to exploring the extent of mutual dependence between the town services and their hinterland.[6]

The location of residence for each visitor was estimated using the respondents' postcodes and were overlaid onto an Ordnance Survey (OS) 1:50 000 raster image, and their location of residence categorised by size of settlement (using OS categorisation). As such, each respondent was categorised as coming from either Alnwick, a city/large urban area, other towns or other smaller settlements. The 'other smaller settlement' category is a proxy for hinterland.

[5] See, for example, Philip (1998) for a discussion of the potential difficulties involved in combining quantitative and qualitative data.

[6] See Powe and Shaw (2001, 2003) for a detail analysis of the results of the town centre surveys undertaken.

4.2. Stage 2

Following Stage 1, house-to-house questionnaire-based surveys were conducted with hinterland residents. In order to consider variation of use and opinion within the hinterland, three areas of Alnwick's hinterland were chosen which have a relatively high visitation rate (based on Stage 1) and differ in terms of a range of characteristics. These areas are labelled as Areas 1, 2 and 3 in Fig. 1 and their characteristics are outlined in Table 1. Area 1 is the closest to Alnwick, consisting of the largest villages, most clearly definable visitation rate and is generally well serviced. Areas 2 and 3 are more sparsely populated. Areas 1 and 3 are reasonably close to other towns, which may affect the residents' use of the services within Alnwick. Area 3 is coastal and consequently a popular destination for tourists. Based on 2001 Population Census data, Area 2 was found to have a lower proportion of elderly population than Areas 1 and 3, though still much larger than the district as whole. In the case of car ownership, Area 1 had the lowest rate but again larger than for the district as a whole. In terms of the DETR's (2000) indices of deprivation, both Area 2 and 3 are comparatively poorly serviced within England.

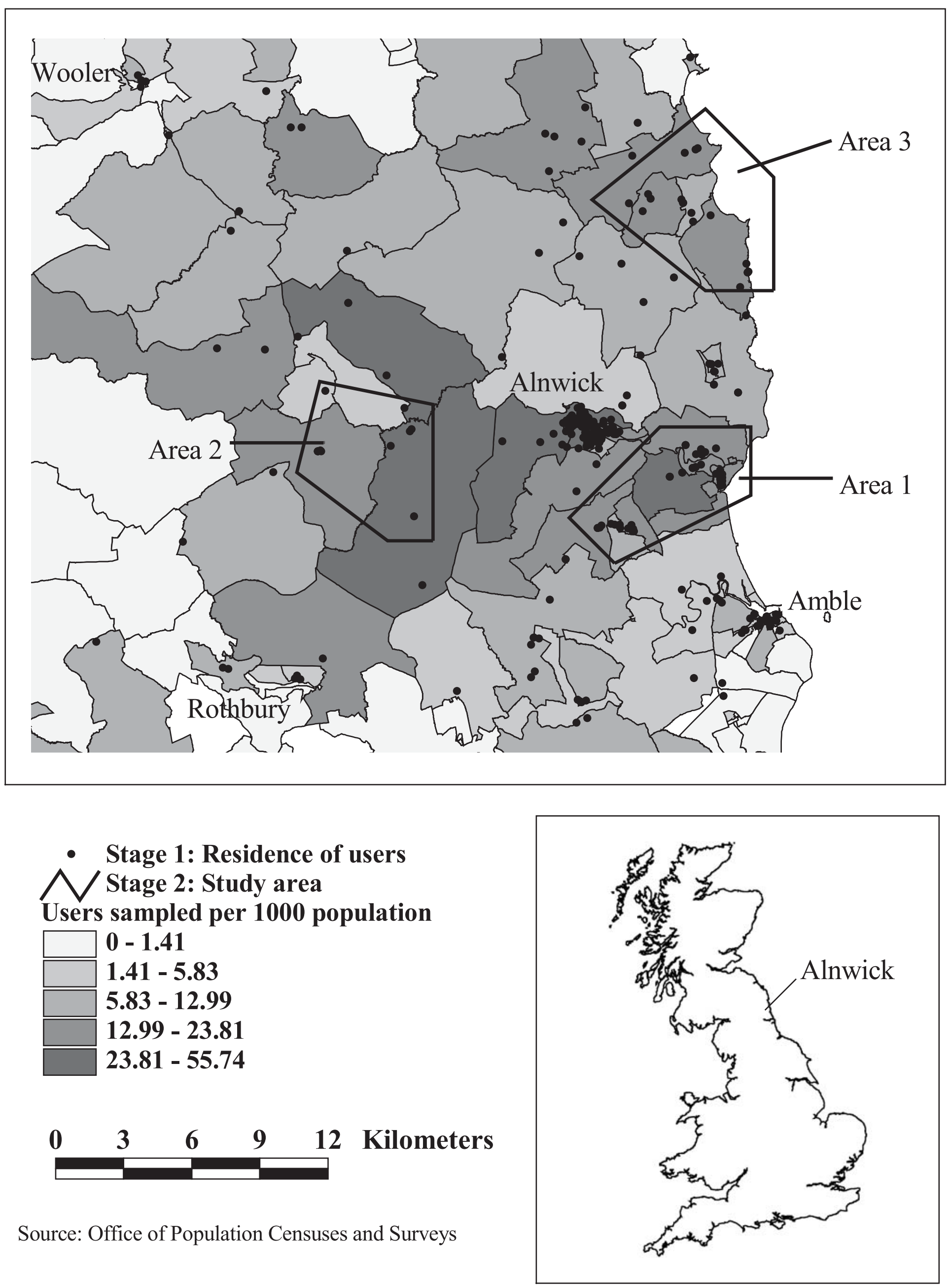

Fig. 1. Residence of Alnwick town center visitors and location of stage 2 study sites.

Table 1
Rural parishes, sample taken and parish characteristics

Area/Parish	Responses	Response rate (%)	Population	Rank of index	Road dist. Alnwick (km)	Post Office?	General store?	No. of Pubs	GP Surgery?	Mobile library?	Place to meet?	Max. days with bus to Alnwick
Area 1	100	50	2892									
Shilbottle (1)	29	—	1397	1518	6	Yes	Yes	2	No	Yes	Yes	7
Lesbury (1)	47	—	909	642	7	Yes	Yes	1	No	Yes	Yes	7
Alnmouth	24	—	586	642	6	Yes	Yes	6	No	Yes	Yes	7
Area 2	85	43	783									
Whittingham (2)	50	—	352	20	14	Yes	No	1	No	Yes	Yes	7
Glanton	15	—	227	8	15	Yes	No	2	No	Yes	Yes	7
Edlingham	20	—	204	8	10	No	No	0	No	Yes	No	0
Area 3	64	32	1180									
Craster (1)	35	—	366	11	12	No	Yes	2	No	Yes	Yes	7
Embleton (1)	17	—	539	165	13	Yes	Yes	4	Yes	Yes	Yes	7
Newton-by-the-Sea	12	—	275	165	16	No	No	2	No	Yes	No	0
Total	249	42	4855									

Note: () indicates the number of focus group(s) conducted within this parish.
Sources: These data come Countryside Agency (2001) (updated where appropriate using other sources), Office of Population Censuses and Surveys and DETR (2000). Note the rank of index is based on Population Census Wards (which are larger than parishes), here selecting the most appropriate, where the index is calculated based on access for people on low income to a post office, food shops, general practitioner and primary school. There are 8414 wards in England and a rank of 1 is the most deprived.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections which are detailed below[7]:

- *Attitudes and preferences towards Alnwick*: Likert scales (see Oppenheim, 1992) were used to assess attitudes and preferences towards the regeneration of Alnwick in general and, more specifically in terms of services. Open-ended questions were used to gain a deeper qualitative understanding of the responses given;
- *Usage of Alnwick for shopping and other services*: The questions related to the type of shop visited for food, how the respondent travelled to purchase food and non-food goods, and the usual place visited for the use of a range of services (food shopping, non-food shopping, post office, pharmacy, general practitioner and library);
- *Visiting Alnwick*: The questions elicited whether the respondent had visited Alnwick in the last month, how many visits they had made, how typical the last month was, key purpose of these visits, services used in the last month, suggestions for improvement (open-ended), evening visits to Alnwick, number of evening visits, what entertainments used, how evening usage could be improved (open-ended).
- *Internet usage to access services*: The questions elicited if the household had internet access, use of the internet to access services and whether they had used the internet instead of visiting Alnwick;
- *Employment*: Within this section the questions elicited basic data on employment status, place of work, occupation and journeys to work.
- *Respondent characteristics*: These were explored using questions on how long the respondents had lived in the village, if it is their normal place of residence, the number of cars in the household, the age household residents and the age of the respondent.

In November 2002, 200 questionnaires were delivered to households within in each area. Table 1 shows a response rate of 42%, which, although comparable with other similar studies, is not distributed evenly. Indeed, a response rate of only 32% was reached within Area 3. When distributing the questionnaires in Area 3 it was noted that there were very few people at home, suggesting there to be a number of second homes in the parishes. This finding was confirmed within the focus groups and other discussions with residents. Indeed, 11 responses (17%) were received from respondents stating that it was not their normal place of residence (compared to 2% for Areas 1 and 2). Based on Census of Population 2001 ward data, very little difference in age distribution was observed between the sample and the population within these areas.

[7] The questionnaires are available upon request from the authors.

Overall, the mean age of the sample was 55.3 compared to 52.6 for the relevant wards using the Census. This difference was found not statistically significant ($p > 0.10$). Furthermore, the mean number of cars per household in the sample is 1.4 and for the Census 1.3, with this difference also not found to be statistically significant ($p > 0.10$). As such, the sample was viewed to be representative of the population of interest.

4.3. Stage 3

Considering the role of market towns in the context of general rural service provision, six focus groups were conducted in the locations Craster, Whittingham (two groups), Embleton, Shillbottle and Lesbury (see Table 1). The location of these groups was chosen for reasons of feasibility and village type. Participants were recruited by approaching village residents, with a £20 incentive being offered to reduce self-selection bias. With the exception of Craster, where sadly there was a death in the village on the day of the meeting, attendance was good. The meetings lasted between 1.5 and 2 h and were led by an experienced facilitator. The topics for discussion were carefully pre-determined to reflect issues of interest and findings within the analysis of Stage 2. The meetings covered the following headings:

- introduction and preamble;
- quality of the services in the village;
- location of service use (based on a grid containing a wide range of services);
- importance of market town in terms of the services they use.

A total of 42 participants were involved in the group meetings, with Table 2 providing a summary of the focus group participant characteristics. As Table 2 shows, the participants reflect a mix of gender, age, length of residence within the village, car ownership and employment status, which was comparable to the range of respondents within Stage 2.

5. Empirical evidence

5.1. Town centre questionnaire survey

The results of the map analysis illustrated the comparative importance of hinterland visitors to the viability of Alnwick services, with approximately the same proportion of visitors coming from other smaller settlements (43%) as from the town itself (43%)[8]. The residential location of Alnwick visitors is illustrated by the black dots in Fig. 1. Indeed, in visitor surveys of three other market towns in the North East of England, Powe and Shaw (2001, 2003) have shown a similar dependence on hinterland visitors. The mutual dependence of the hinterland on Alnwick services is illustrated by the darkness of the shading in Fig. 1, which represents the visitation rate (visitors per 1000 population) for each Enumeration District. Clearly the future of rural services in Alnwick is highly reliant on the continuation of this interdependence.

[8]The remainder of the sample were from other towns (11%) and cities and other larger urban areas (4%).

5.2. Hinterland questionnaire survey

5.2.1. The importance of Alnwick services

The hinterland questionnaire survey provided further confirmation of the importance of Alnwick services to hinterland residents. Indeed, 98% of the respondents had visited Alnwick within the last month and most had used a broad range of its services, including: supermarket (78%); other food shops (61%); non-food shops (46%); pubs (14%); general services (67%) (e.g. District Council, health, insurance, solicitor, travel agent or bank); post-office (35%); market (30%); cinema (13%); theatre (18%); and cafes and restaurants (28%). Confirmation of Alnwick's role came also from attitudinal questions, where 86% of respondents considered Alnwick 'an important place to shop' and 79% agreeing Alnwick is 'an important place to access services'.

The use of Alnwick town centre services also extended into the evening, with 42% of respondents having visited in the last month. Evening activities were varied, and were undertaken by all age groups. Indeed, the mean age of those visiting the market town in the evening was 51 years, with the mean for the whole sample being only slightly higher (53). The most popular activities in Alnwick were: theatre (18%); eating out (13%); pubs (9%); cinema (8%); clubs (7%); and petrol/takeaway (5%).

Using chi-squared statistical analysis to test for diversity in terms of socio-economic characteristics, use, and attitudes towards the services provided within Alnwick, little between-area diversity was found. Indeed, only for use of the general practitioner (GP), pharmacy, library and pubs, was a statistically significant difference observed ($p < 0.05$). The reasons for these differences were clear. The presence of a GP surgery and facilities for providing medication provided the likely explanation for differences in GP and pharmacy use. Comparative distance to Alnwick explained the variation in library and pub use. Indeed, in Areas 2 and 3 more use was made of the mobile library.

Despite the importance of Alnwick services to hinterland residents, signs of 'out-shopping' were observed. A sizeable minority of hinterland residents (33%) did not do their main food shopping within the towns (instead,

Table 2
Focus group participant characteristics

Group/Sex of participant	Age Group	Years lived in village	Own car?	Employment status
Craster				
M	65–74	56	No	Retired
F	75+	72	No	Retired
F	65–74	36	Yes	Retired
Whittingham (1)				
M	65–74	Many years	Yes	Retired
F	45–54	6	Yes	P-T employed
M	75+	24	Yes	Retired
F	16–17	17	No	Student
F	45–54	21	Yes	Self-employed
M	55–64	2	Yes	Retired
Whittingham (2)				
M	35–44	40	Yes	Self-employed
M	65–74	35	Yes	Retired
F	65–74	15	Yes	Retired
F	75+	20	Yes	Retired
F	75+	60	No	Retired
F	35–44	14	Yes	Long term sick
F	65–74	5	Yes	Retired
M	45–54	11	Yes	Self-employed
Embleton				
M	75+	41	Yes	Retired
F	65–74	15	Yes	Retired
F	45–54	10	Yes	F-T employed
F	35–44	43	Yes	Self-employed
F	55–64	34	Yes	P-T employed
F	55–64	6	Yes	Carer
M	16–17	<1	Yes	Student
Shilbottle				
M	55–64	45	No	Retired
F	45–54	52	Yes	P-T employed
F	25–34	33	Yes	P-T employed
F	65–74	40	Yes	Retired
F	35–44	17	No	F-T employed
M	65–74	43	No	Retired
M	65–74	71	No	Retired
F	55–64	50	No	Retired
F	25–34	33	Yes	Homemaker
F	65–74	54	No	Retired
Lesbury				
M	65–74	2	Yes	Retired
M	55–64	35	Yes	Self-employed
M	65–74	30	Yes	Retired
M	75+	30	Yes	Retired
M	75+	2	No	Retired
F	55–64	26	Yes	F-T employed
F	55–64	12	Yes	Retired
F	45–54	12	Yes	P-T employed

mostly in larger urban areas). In terms of non-food retail the 'out-shopping' was much greater, with 67% of respondents not conducting their main non-food shopping in Alnwick. The city of Newcastle upon Tyne and a nearby large indoor shopping complex (Gateshead Metro Centre) were used for the main non-food shopping by 48% of respondents. Car use to access such services was high, with only 5% of the sample using the local bus service to travel to purchase their main food shopping and 7% for their main non-food shopping. If a mutual dependence between Alnwick services and hinterland residents is to continue, measures to maintain existing trade as well as 'clawing-it-back' are needed.

Table 3
Logistic models of service use in Alnwick

Variables	Main food shopping (Alnwick)	Main non-food shopping (Alnwick)	Post Office (last month)	Visit Alnwick pubs (last month)	Visit Alnwick Playhouse[1] (last month)
Intercept	2.18(0.09)	−2.11(0.00)	0.51(0.09)	9.19(0.00)	−1.50(0.08)
Main supermarket shopping (A)	—	1.28(0.00)	—	—	—
Main non-food shopping (A)	1.38(0.00)	-	—	—	—
No. of visits in last month (A)	0.06(0.01)	-	—	—	—
Member of a library (A)	—	—	—	—	1.10(0.00)
Cafe/restaurant (last month) (A)	—	—	0.98(0.01)	—	0.96(0.01)
Market (last month) (A)	—	—	—	—	0.89(0.01)
Services (last month) (A)	—	—	1.56(0.00)	—	—
Supermarket (last month) (A)	—	—	1.24(0.00)	—	—
Not using car	2.50(0.01)	1.44(0.01)	—	—	—
Number of cars in household	—	—	—	—	0.78(0.01)
Ln (Road distance) (A)	—	—	—	1.586(0.00)	—
Travel to work time	—	−0.02(0.05)	—	—	—
Moved to area (last 5 years)	—	−0.79(0.04)	—	—	—
Moved to area * retire	—	—	—	—	0.79(0.03)
Parish has post office	—	—	−0.91(0.01)	—	—
Age	0.03(0.01)	—	—	—	—
Ln (Age)	—	—	—	−1.93(0.00)	—
Female	—	—	—	—	0.97(0.01)
Log-Likelihood ratio[2]	0.15	0.10	0.14	0.14	0.19
Sample size	236	238	245	245	239

Note: [1] The playhouse is a shared theatre and cinema facility.
[2] The log-likelihood ratio is constrained between zero and one, with the greater the ratio the better the goodness of fit of the measure (Field, 2000; Greene, 2002).

5.2.2. Factors affecting the use of Alnwick services

In order to consider the future prospects for Alnwick services, it is necessary first to explore the factors affecting current use. Although visitors may use many services, it is important to understand the key factor(s) affecting their decision to visit the town. When asked their main motivation for visiting the town, although a number of respondents (33) stated multiple reasons, the vast majority were able to answer the question, with the supermarket being the most popular stated (49%). Other motivations were also important such as going to work (12%), visiting other food shops (11%) and meeting friends (11%).

Adopting a multivariate approach similar to Guy (1990), the factors affecting the use of Alnwick services were also explored using logistic regression. This is a regression approach in which the outcome or dependent variable is dichotomous (the dependent variable take two states, e.g., either the respondent conducts their main food shopping in Alnwick or they conduct it elsewhere) and is explained using predictor or explanatory variables that can be either dichotomous or continuous. The link between predictor and outcome is made in terms of the ratio of probabilities, such that the coefficients can be directly linked to the likelihood of an event occurring. Table 3 provides the models for a selection of key services, namely: main supermarket shopping in Alnwick (1 for yes; 0 for no); main non-food shopping in Alnwick (1 for yes; 0 for no); visit pubs in Alnwick in the month prior to the survey being conducted (last month) (1 for yes; 0 for no); visit the Playhouse (shared cinema and theatre facility) in Alnwick in the last month (1 for yes; 0 for no); and use the Alnwick post-office(s) in the last month (1 for yes; 0 for no). A series of variables were made available to the models, reflecting use of other services, access, availability of parish services and socio-economic groupings. The *p*-values in the parentheses illustrate that all variables included are significant at the 5% level.

In the second column of Table 3 the factors affecting the choice of Alnwick for their main food shopping are considered (with 71% of the sample conducting their main food shopping in Alnwick). This was found to be positively related to whether residents also conducted their main non-food shopping in Alnwick, the number of visits they had made to Alnwick in the last month, if they did not have access to a car and their age. This further illustrates the importance of the link between the use of the food shops and other services, and the dependence of older and/or less mobile on Alnwick's food retail outlets. The results in column three for non-food retail (33% main non-food shopping) suggest a similar interdependence between food and non-food retail and dependence by those without cars. However, as expected, non-food retail is also more sensitive to where the residents work (if work outside the area are less likely to purchase non-food retail in Alnwick) and if they are incomers (if an incomer then are less likely to purchase non-food retail in Alnwick). The results for the post-offices in Alnwick (35% in the last month) suggest a greater interdependence than food and non-food shopping in terms of the range of services used. Use, however, is also affected by whether the respondent's parish has its own post-office.

Columns five and six suggest the factors affecting the use of leisure services: pubs; and playhouse (combined theatre and cinema). Use of public houses in Alnwick (14% in the last month) was found only to be affected by the age of the respondents and the distance they have to travel. The likelihood of visiting the playhouse (26% in the last month) was positively affected by the use of other services (perhaps not on the same visit), the number of cars in the household, if they are both retired and an incomer to the area, and if they are female. A key finding here is the suggested potential for market towns from the increasing numbers of retired incomers. This potential is particularly great, as patronage of the cinema/theatre complex is not significantly related to distance from home; suggesting it has a wider catchment area than other services such as public houses.

5.2.3. Understanding the threat/opportunity from the Internet

Some indication of the likely affects of demographic and mobility changes have been considered above. Understanding the threat from the Internet required separate consideration. The Internet provides an alternative way of accessing certain services from the market town and beyond. With 56% of the participants having access to the Internet, the potential would appear great. Indeed, in terms of access to the Internet and learning the skills required to use it, Embleton and Shilbottle parishes have both computer facilities available and run courses to improve skills. Those respondents with their own connection to the Internet had used it to access banking services (39%), shop for clothes (15%), shop for food (4% and available across all areas), find out about social events (22%), and check for jobs (16%). Although these figures suggest a significant proportion of hinterland residents using the Internet, this use is much higher for younger age groups. For example, 70% for those aged between 16 and 34 had access to the Internet and 67% of people within this age group used the Internet for banking services, 47% to shop for clothes, 6% to shop for food, 41% for social events and 50% to check for jobs. This might be considered an indication of the future use of the Internet. With technological change and a gradual improvement to the access of faster Internet services within rural areas, use may increase.

Regarding current use of the Internet, an important question is whether those using the Internet for these activities had done so as an alternative to visiting Alnwick. 12% of those with access to the Internet had previously used it instead of visiting Alnwick, with ease and convenience being the reasons stated. Those not using the Internet as an alternative to visiting Alnwick stated that they preferred to go in person (25%), had not thought about it (21%), only using it for things not available within Alnwick (18%), go frequently into Alnwick anyway (7%), and have not had the computer long enough to say (7%).

5.2.4. Potential for 'clawing back' from larger urban areas

The need to encourage rural residents to use services within their nearest market town, as opposed to travelling further afield to larger urban areas, has been identified above. In order to explore this issue further, respondents were asked if there was anything that could be improved in order to encourage them to visit Alnwick. A wide range of qualitative responses were given (with more than one response allowed per respondent), but the key issues for improvement were the supermarket (33%), parking (29%), shopping in general (17%), non-food shops (15%), bus service (8%), opening hours (5%), facilities for disabled (4%) and restaurants (3%).

Exploring the potential for increasing the patronage of Alnwick it was found that, of those currently doing their main food shopping outside Alnwick, 61% noted that they could be encouraged to shop more in Alnwick if another improved supermarket was developed, compared to the 33% reported above for the sample as a whole (significant 5% level). A similar, though not as stark, finding was also present for those doing their main non-food shopping outside Alnwick, with 36% suggesting they would shop more in Alnwick if shopping improved compared to 26% (derived from the statistics above) for the sample as a whole ($p<0.05$). Particularly, in the case of supermarket shopping, these results suggest that improving the shopping facilities within Alnwick would 'claw-back' trade. Given the frequency of purchase, the potential for 'clawing-back' trade from large urban areas is perhaps greater for food shopping. Indeed, the regression analysis suggested that the choice of where to shop for food might be less sensitive to whether the respondent commutes and/or is an in-migrant. The regression results also suggested that the 'clawing-back' of this trade may increase the use of other Alnwick services such as non-food shopping and the post-office, further demonstrating the potential if trade could be 'clawed-back'.

5.3. Focus group analysis

Whereas the hinterland questionnaire focused on the use of services within Alnwick, the focus groups provided a wider discussion and the role of market towns was viewed only within the context of general rural service provision. Within this wider discussion, a strong preference for village level services was expressed, with those that remained being held dearly. For example, within Lesbury, at the time of the study, there was a threat to the post office/general store and was the subject of much discussion. The post-office was well used by the focus group participants and, regardless of car ownership, would be missed by all attending the meeting[9]. However, most concern was expressed regarding those that are less mobile. As the bus link to Alnwick does not run through the centre of the village, there may be no viable alternative for those less mobile.

Within Whittingham, the loss in the last few years of both the public house and village shop was also the subject of much discussion. The loss of these village services was felt beyond a 'top-up' shopping facility or a place to buy alcohol. In addition, these services provide an informal meeting place, which is difficult to supply within market towns for rural residents. The limited post-office that remains was seen as 'no substitute'. It was also suggested that the school in Whittingham still provides an informal meeting place, however, this was only for certain age groups. In Embleton a similar experience was described, where it was explained how participants meet friends informally by just going about their general life within the village, which included visiting the village shop. It is very difficult to provide such added value of local service provision at the market town level.

Despite the preference for the presence of village level services expressed, perhaps due to the quality and price of the services provided, the results of the service grid[10] completed within the focus group suggested their patronage to be elsewhere. The service grid results also further confirmed the importance of Alnwick as a service centre and that food shopping in Alnwick is more popular than non-food. This difference was explained in terms of the poor range of non-food shops, difficulties parking in the centre of Alnwick[11] and frequency of shopping. Confirmation was also provided of the link between the use of the post-office and cafes/restaurants, the supermarket and a range of other services. Interestingly, despite the difference in quality (for example, bigger shows, better actors, latest films), older participants suggested that they were less inclined to make the journey to larger urban areas to visit the theatre or cinema. They preferred instead to visit the complex in Alnwick.

Given the level of use described above, whether hinterland residents had a sense of affinity and/or loyalty towards Alnwick was explored within the focus groups. Perhaps surprisingly, the participants did not express any such feelings. Indeed, the comments made suggested their use to be purely instrumental. Indeed, for participants from Area 1 (closest to Alnwick), due to their lack of mobility, there was a feeling from some participants that there was simply no choice of anywhere else to go. This finding is in contrast to the comments made regarding village-level services.

Though there was some resistance to its use, particularly amongst the retired, the Internet also provided some discussion within focus groups. In confirmation to the hinterland questionnaire survey, eight participants indicated within the service grid that they had used the Internet to access key services. These users were asked if they would use the service more if they had access to the faster service (Broadband). Although they showed interest, for their current uses of the Internet, the faster service was considered not worth the additional expenditure.[12]

Beyond access to computers or skills, a limiting factor on the use of the Internet was also the lack of a bank account. Another participant noted a fear of giving banking details on the Internet, and a desire to talk to somebody, which could be achieved by ordering goods on the phone. Related to this, an issue not considered within the hinterland questionnaire survey was the comparative importance of mail order. Compared to the Internet, 11 participants were found to use mail order to purchase a range of products, suggesting that for remote purchasing is at least as popular as the Internet. This puts the current role of the Internet in context.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Faced with the problems of access, distance and low population density, the provision of quality services to rural areas is inherently difficult. Although the role of

[9]The threat to the loss of the post office seemed not to be on account of any lack of trade, but, instead, due to problems finding a proprietor that could afford housing within the village.

[10]As noted earlier, the focus group participants were asked to complete a service grid in which the rows listed a wide range of services and the columns possible locations for their use. For each service the participants were asked to tick the location where it was last accessed.

[11]There is parking available outside the main supermarket, however, parking for non-food shopping within the town centre was more difficult.

[12]This service, currently not available to 67% of households in the UK is faster than a more conventional connection, allows the splitting of the Internet connection between computers as well as enabling the telephone to be used simultaneously. For a discussion of the Broadband service see Countryside Agency (2003).

market towns in alleviating problems in the provision of rural services has been given little consideration within the academic literature, they are currently being targeted by UK government policy. Using the results of a three-stage survey in and around the market town of Alnwick in the North East of England, this paper has explored the current and future role of market towns in servicing their hinterlands. The results justify current government policy and provide a substantial body of evidence from which useful policy recommendations are made.

The survey findings have illustrated that, for a range of services, Alnwick is currently an important destination for its hinterland residents and represents approximately 40% of the trade for market town services. Indeed, the results identified a mutual dependence, whereby the viability of the market town services are dependent upon trade from hinterland residents and where many of these hinterland residents also depend on such services being provided within their nearest town. It is suggested that the future of market town services and their provision, particularly those less mobile, will depend on the continuation of such a relationship.

Increased in-migration, commuting, consumer expectations, aging population, and pressures to reap economies of scale are likely to continue into the future. Although some role for non-food retail is likely to remain, due to the frequency of purchase, the physical distance is likely to be more of a deterrent for food shopping and evening entertainments. By providing improved supermarket services within market towns, the results also suggest great potential to 'claw-back' trade, which may increase the patronage of other market town services. Furthermore, although future demographic changes are expected to have mixed fortunes for service provision within market towns, the findings of the hinterland survey suggest older hinterland residents are more inclined to purchase food locally.

The hinterland survey suggested there was also potential for patronage of evening entertainments within market towns. Whereas pub use was found to be related to distance from home, the use of the cinema/theatre was not. This suggests there may be a wider catchment area and greater potential for more non-pub evening entertainment facilities. More generally, even though the service quality is better, as residents grow older, their will to go out might not diminish, they may become less willing to travel to larger urban areas to access evening entertainments. This was demonstrated for the theatre/cinema complex in Alnwick, where retired in-migrants were also more likely than others to use this facility. Furthermore, although those commuting the furthest were found to be less likely to do their non-food shopping in market towns, as they are unlikely to wish to make a similar journey at the weekends, there is also potential to entice such hinterland residents to the market town. Such potential may only be realised through investment in the local environment of the towns, dealing with issues such as lighting, which may be used to enhance the appearance of historic monuments as well as improve perceptions of safety.

The Internet will continue to provide an increasing role within rural service provision. Access to the Internet was found to be high, particularly amongst those between 16 and 34 yr of age. Banking, shopping for clothes and information on social events and jobs were the key services accessed on the Internet. Some respondents were found to have used the Internet as an alternative to visiting the market town, with this trend likely to increase in the future. However, in terms of the purchase of goods remotely, the use of mail order catalogues was still at least as common.

Although the Internet is likely to continue to be a threat to market town services, it may also enhance the linkages with the hinterland. For example, there is potential to use the Internet to improve existing outreach services, which are usually based within market towns. The practice of employing a webmaster for the town website may significantly encourage a number of businesses. However, there is much to be done for the potential to be realised, where discussions with market town project officers suggest that a number of local businesses do not even have a computer. Whether supermarket chains are willing to provide for rural areas the Internet based shopping services currently in urban areas also is unclear. The feasibility and scope for subsidy may depend on the use of such services by the elderly, for whom improved outreach services could prove essential. However, the older members of the group meetings were the least enthusiastic to engage with the Internet. With time these barriers are likely to diminish.

Despite the importance of Alnwick services, the focus group results suggest that the participants did not feel there was anything 'special' about visiting the town. Rather than having a sense of affinity and/or loyalty towards the town, their relationship with it was purely instrumental. In contrast, although the lure of better service quality and/or lower prices means that hinterland residents main patronage is elsewhere, village level services were held dearly and seen to provide an added value in terms of an informal meeting place and to play an important role in community cohesion. Just like village level services, if market towns are going to compete with the better quality and/or lower prices within larger urban areas, they need to provide an added value beyond their current services. Developing a sense of affinity and loyalty for the market town has been central to customer card schemes previously developed.[13] These findings suggest that perhaps more is required. Extending the sense of belonging beyond the

[13]For example, see Worthington (1998).

boundaries of the town itself will be crucial within this process. This may be achievable, for example, through working closely with the local news paper, which may be uniformly read within the market town and its hinterland, and through events which, for example, demonstrate a shared local history and interest in the town beyond its role as a service centre. Furthermore, despite the difficulties outlined by Caffyn (2004), there is a need to keep the views of the hinterland residents very much in mind when formulating town centre regeneration strategies.

A growing understanding of the nature of the relationship between the market town and its hinterland lies at the heart of this paper. It is inevitable that each market town will illustrate some unique characteristics, but it is probable that there will be many features, which are common to all market towns and their hinterland. A better understanding of this should form the basis for more informed policy making both nationally and regionally. Equally, stronger, more evidence-based research could help to target future grant-in-aid in a more effective manner.

The recent history of Alnwick shows a fluctuating pattern of success and failure in economic activity and it is inevitable this will continue to be the case. However, in looking to the future, neither through ignorance nor neglect, should any further disintegration of the hinterland links be permitted, for here lies the foundation upon which to build. In a rapidly changing rural economy the market town will still remain a logical place in which to plan for sustainable development and be the provider of many services that cannot be provided so easily at the village level, through the internet or by other "at-distance" means. Similarly, the utilisation of services by a population of the hinterland helps to provide a sustainable raison d'être for the provision of such activity within the market town itself.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Glyn Bateman (Countryside Agency) for discussion on market town policy in the North East and his local knowledge of the individual towns, and to Katie Barrow, Russell Hall, Christopher Hull, Rebecca Marcus and Edward Purnell for diligently conducting the survey work. Any remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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