



SMALL TOWNS INITIATIVE: CAMPBELTOWN REPORT



This report by BEFS Chairman, Professor Emeritus Cliff Hague, is based on a visit to Campbeltown in March 2013 as part of BEFS' Small Towns Initiative.



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There are few places in the world where palm trees are blasted by snow and sleet thrown at them by gale force east winds. This unseasonable meteorological greeting provided an important insight to Campbeltown – expect the unexpected. The town sits at the end of a long winding road, a 3-hour drive from Glasgow, but it does have an airport. Campbeltown has been identified as one of the most vulnerable towns in Scotland, and one of the most remote in the UK,

yet its citizens have exceptional practical expertise in managing crises. It is playing a significant role in Scotland's drive for renewable energy, but fuel poverty rates in Campbeltown are almost double the national average, according to the [2012 Community Profile](#).

Remote and vulnerable

Across the world, small towns in remote regions are sliding towards demographic and economic oblivion. The extreme cases have become ghost towns; in others an elderly population hangs on; the young flee to the educational opportunities and jobs of the urban agglomerations, driven there by ambition or despair. These momentous changes leave behind a set of statistics: an “hourglass” demographic structure that is bottom and top heavy but squeezed in the middle; high rates of people out of work, in poverty, or working in the public sector. Crunch numbers like these and you can rank towns in terms of their “vulnerability”. That is pretty much what the Scottish Agricultural College did in their [Rural Scotland in Focus 2012 report](#). They analysed data for 90 towns in Scotland and compiled a Vulnerability Index. The statistics placed Campbeltown along with Dunoon as the most vulnerable of these towns.

Similarly, there is objective evidence of Campbeltown's remoteness. Road access is via the A83. It is not quick and there are times when landslips or accidents block off this lifeline for the town's businesses and residents. There are five daily buses from Glasgow, but if you are out there for a night on the town, then be sure to wrap up the partying before 6pm so you can catch the last bus back home. Trains? Not in this part of the world.

The resident population of Campbeltown and its surrounding villages is around 6,000. A study published at the end of 2010 ([CHORD Programme Socio – Economic Baseline, Campbeltown Locality](#)) looked at a wider area, incorporating Campbeltown with its hinterland in the rest of the Kintyre. On this basis the 2008 population was put at just under 9,000. There had been a 12% drop between 2001 and 2008, which was most marked in the younger and working age groups.

The percentage of people aged 70 or over in Campbeltown is higher than for Argyle and Bute, while those in the working age groups are lower than the local authority average. There is a

relatively high representation of 0-19s, and especially of the 11-15 band. A 25% population drop is predicted by 2025. These figures give serious cause for concern.

Like so many small towns, Campbeltown has been the plaything of forces beyond its own control. Its traditional industries – whisky, shipbuilding, fishing, forestry and tourism – have all experienced restructuring, and the same is true for agriculture which was once the mainstay of the surrounding area. The local shipyard closed in the 1980s; in the 1990s the military pulled out of RAF Machrihanish, and there were closures at Jaeger's clothing factory (300 jobs) and a plastic model factory. Highlands and Islands Enterprise politely calls Campbeltown an “area of employment deficit”.

According to the socio-economic baseline report of 2010, mentioned already, the key employment sectors in the Campbeltown locality are ‘public administration, education & health’ (38%) and ‘distribution, hotels & restaurants’ (26%). Before the recession hit there had been a small growth in local employment.

The long recession has hit the housing market, and there is growing concern about the condition of tenement properties in the heart of the town. Flats here can be picked up for less than £25,000, clear evidence of low demand. Not surprisingly, there are some vacant shops and “bargain stores” in the town centre. The 2010 baseline report recorded 20 vacancies out of the 135 units in the town centre. High levels of fuel poverty have been reported in the Campbeltown Community Action Plan of the South Kintyre Development Trust.

In short, it adds up to a bleak picture, a town teetering towards a downward spiral of disinvestment, decaying buildings, unemployment and outmigration from a place that is just too far away from Scotland's centres of opportunity. However, the findings of the Vulnerability Index are **fiercely contested** locally. There is another side to this story.

Community-led regeneration

The closure of the former RAF station at Machrihanish in 1996 was a severe blow to the local economy. For years the 1000 acre site a few miles outside Campbeltown lay vacant. In 2012 it was bought for £1 by **Machrihanish Airbase Community Company (MACC)** in a community buy-out that commanded wide popular support and was backed by the Scottish government. The formal hand-over was in May 2012.

The aim is to work with the Argyll and Bute Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to re-create an economic asset and to prevent asset-stripping. The task is daunting and it speaks volumes for the vision and commitment of the local people that it is being undertaken at all. MACC owns some 200 buildings, including an aircraft hanger, bars and clubs and a church. Not only are there reports of possible radio-active contamination on the site, but essential utilities including water and electricity have to be managed (the site has its own water supply).

One idea that MACC is exploring is for a duty free facility within the former airbase. This is seen as a way to boost the manufacture of green energy products.



Campbeltown Airport is in part of the site, though this use predates the buy-out. It has a long lease and is not affected by the buy-out. FlyBe operate two daily return flights to Glasgow, Monday to Friday. There is no weekend service at present, though one is expected to start during 2013. There are also ferry connections from the port. Private charter and passenger ferry services operate between Campbeltown and various destinations including Northern Ireland, Arran and Troon. A Campbeltown-Ardrossan ferry is expected, offering possibilities for weekend trips to and from the town.

Renewable energy

Another part of the site is leased for construction of wind towers, though the business has gone through ups and downs. The Danish company Vestas pulled out and another Danish firm, Skykon, took over the plant in 2009. However, Skykon soon went bust. Now the giant towers are produced by Wind Towers, a firm 80% owned by Scottish and Southern Energy. Arguably this is the last chance saloon for the venture, but there are some encouraging signs. Wind Towers' constructions are to be used in SSE's 10-turbine wind farm at Cour, 20 miles north of Campbeltown, where a planning permission was granted in October 2012. More significant in the long run, is the potential to serve a global market from this small peninsula. Joined up thinking and delivery is needed to make the dream a reality.

Scotland's west coast, along with the northern isles and the Atlantic coast of Ireland, are the regions of Europe where production of energy from wind is cheapest. South Kintyre can offer the kind of space needed to construct the megalith-like towers. Campbeltown has a sheltered deep water harbour on the west coast. Import of raw materials and export of the finished products is practicable. £4.6m was invested in the New Quay at the harbour to assist the renewables industry. Better air links, with scheduling to allow day return business trips beyond Glasgow, would add to the attraction.

The vision is for Wind Towers to become just one component in a renewable energy hub. As well as wind farms, tidal energy prospects look promising. Offshore energy needs onshore support facilities. Campbeltown / Machrihanish is one of 11 sites identified in Scotland National Renewables Infrastructure Plan. Could Campbeltown, with its traditions in engineering, become a major player in a more sustainable energy future? Can it grow as part of a West Coast cluster with Arnish and Kishorn?

Jobs for the boys?

There are arguments that many of the renewable energy jobs at Machrihanish have been taken by immigrant workers from elsewhere in the EU, improving local employment but not helping the local unemployed. Just as important, the renewable energy business is male-dominated at present, while evidence from elsewhere shows that young, well-qualified females are especially prone to move from small towns that are in decline. Female-friendly economic development policies and practices are needed to retain these women, or to attract them back. Furthermore, lack of female career options may discourage males in two-earner households from locating in an area.





The Campbeltown area can certainly offer quality of life for young families, and there is a good range of formal activities for children in the town. The recently developed £7.5M Aquilibrium is a multi-functional leisure complex that both serves the local population and boosts the tourism offer. There has also been investment in all-weather football pitches, yet the feeling persists that maybe more attention could be focused on the girls of the town.

Conservation

Here, as elsewhere, conservation of the historic environment has a key part to play in sustaining the town. In particular, the experience in Campbeltown shows what an important part the Heritage Lottery Fund's Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) and Historic Scotland's Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme (CARS) can play in a small town where there has been a long period of under-investment in property maintenance. The CARS here ran from 2007-2012, and the THI from 2009-2014.

THI investment has focused initially on the town centre. There have been tenement refurbishments and improvements to shop fronts, as well as work on the Old Schoolhouse (empty since the 1980s) and the Royal Hotel which occupies a pivotal site connecting the harbour and the main street. Both are "B-listed".

The hotel is owned by Southworth Developments who also own and operate Machrihanish Dunes Golf Resort. The company have invested over £20million in South Kintyre during the past 5 years, employing over 100 people. The golf course has been consistently ranked in the top 100 in the UK by leading golf publications, and was named the world's number 1 Eco Course by the ABTA Magazine in 2012. Clearly the conservation money invested is intertwined in the delivery of wider economic and environmental benefits to the area.

The Schoolhouse was a complex project, with money from Europe as well as CARS and THI, and the involvement of the Kintyre Amenities Trust and the Strathclyde Buildings Preservation Trust. It opened in 2012 as a "[bunkhouse](#)" managed by Kintyre Amenity Trust.

The THI has also funded the Campbeltown Heritage Trail Group. Key statistics for the Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme and THI work, covering the period 2007-2013, are summarised in the table. Every attempt has been made to use local contractors, sub-contractors and materials, thus boosting the local economy. Again relative remoteness may have helped in this.

- Total number of Grants offered = 75
- Resulted in work to 51 town centre buildings
- Total amount of grants offered = £835,000

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- Total amount of eligible costs = £1.6 million
- Total amount of spend on these buildings = £4.4 million
- Number of shopfronts completed = 17
- Number of original windows refurbished = 120
- Number of local contractors involved = 35
- Number of training events held = 28
- Number of delegates participating at events = Over 300
- Number of people engaged at all events = Over 1000



The outstanding success story in Campbeltown is the **Picture House**. It will celebrate its centenary in May 2013. It was one of Scotland's earliest purpose-built cinemas, and is possibly the oldest that has been continuously running films. It is an "A-listed" building. Its survival and current vibrancy is due to the efforts of local volunteers who operate it as a community business.

The Scottish Renaissance Burnet Building has also been conserved after the library moved out to the Aqualibrium in 2007. It houses the local museum and is used as a service hub by Argyll and Bute Council, whose headquarters are in Lochgilphead, over an hour's drive away. Campbeltown's own town hall, which dates from the 18th century, occupies a prominent position on the main street. The South Kintyre Development Trust is actively working on conserving the fabric of this important **town centre building** and seeking viable future uses through asset transfer into community ownership. The town hall is the focus for a Stage 2 bid to the THI. If the bid is successful, it could breathe new life into the town centre.

Overall, the town centre has a large number of independent retailers. Traders may have benefited from the protection from competition that comes with the town's relative remoteness. This may also have been a factor in slowing the arrival of the recession into the commercial life of the town. However, there appear to be few high added value shops, and there is also a large supermarket on the edge of the town centre. An active Town Centre Management initiative is bringing traders together, and there is a willingness to look beyond retailing for new uses for former shops.

There are opportunities to improve the attractiveness of the town centre, over and above the good work already done through the CARS and THI. In particular, the pedestrian experience could be enhanced and disabled access improved. Probably the main opportunity lies in the small Burnside Square behind the Town Hall. It is close to the Main St and the waterfront. Potentially this could be an intimate space, urban in character yet in scale with the rest of the

town. Currently it is given over to car parking, but [ideas](#) for use as a Town Market have been floated.

At a time when there is talk of residential uses as a way to sustain Scottish town centres, the lack of demand for Campbeltown's tenement flats and the problems of disinvestment from repair and maintenance must be a worry. Efforts are being made to alert property owners and residents to these issues. Argyll and Bute Council Housing Services and Campbeltown THI have been working together to tackle this problem. The THI funded and facilitated the production of the [Campbeltown Tenement Maintenance Guide](#). However, the condition of and demand for the tenement is something that will need to be monitored.

Branding and marketing

So just what is the Campbeltown brand, and how can it be best promoted? Some local businesses feel that within Visit Scotland's marketing, Campbeltown and its hinterland gets less prominence than they would like. The outcome has been the formation of the [Kintyre and Gigha Marketing Group](#). It aims to increase visitor numbers and length of stay and enhance their experience.

Campbeltown's identity needs to be defined both in its own right, but also in relation to the wider area. However, this raises some other questions. How to handle the issue of remoteness? Is it an asset or a handicap? Similarly, will the push for renewables enhance or undermine the image of Kintyre as an area of natural beauty? Do massive wind towers on huge lorries inching their way through the streets of Campbeltown on their way to the harbour ignite wonder or frustration?

The working harbour is part of an attractive stretch of waterfront that has been enhanced by the development of a marina. This is part of Argyll and Bute Council's [CHORD regeneration initiative](#) across five waterfront towns (Campbeltown, Helensburgh, Oban, Rothesay and Dunoon).

The area offers not just scenery and wildlife but multiple opportunities for active outdoor recreation – walking, wind surfing, kayaking etc. There would seem to be scope for Campbeltown to present itself as a venue for evening and wet weather entertainment, possibly showcasing and developing local artists and performers. The [Kintyre Cultural Forum](#), another grassroots body, has aspirations for a new Arts and Culture Centre. In the meantime they host various events. There is a successful Music Festival and also a Songwriters Festival each year. Campbeltown has award winning pipe bands and brass bands. With 2014 designated as The Homecoming, might it be possible to make connections to the Kintyre diaspora and offer a programme of distinctive local events and activities? At the moment, [visitor perceptions](#) of the town centre as a destination are marred by empty shops, the run-down appearance of some buildings and a perception that there is too little to do there.

Another potential issue for branding is the relation between Campbeltown and the developments planned for Machrihanish. If the MACC vision is a success, might it undermine aspects of the commercial life of Campbeltown – e.g. if a retail component developed “out of town”?

Public Services

It is difficult to understate the importance of Campbeltown's public services both for the town itself and the outlying villages. Every possible benefit needs to be squeezed from this investment, so that each pound spent achieves multiple outcomes. Education and skills development is fundamental to the future of the area. The connections that already exist between the secondary school and voluntary groups and local events need to be built upon. There should be outreach to involve the school pupils in any discussions about the future of the town. Can the experience of the community businesses and local private businesses be a basis for after-school hands-on sessions for young entrepreneurs? The school also provides customers for town centre shops, and in today's difficult trading conditions every advantage should be taken of this.

There is access to higher education through the local Argyll College that is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands. Although the funding climate is difficult this again provides a resource that should be factored into any development strategy. In particular, between MACC and Gigha there is cutting edge experience in community buy-outs and community-led regeneration. Can this be built upon as a "cluster of excellence"?

Health services are vital but here, as in any other area of public spending (e.g. primary school closures) there is the risk of top-down rationalisations that look sensible from far away. Arresting the decline in permanent residents and attracting more visitors may be the best way to retain essential services.

Vulnerability and resilience

Campbeltown is a town of paradoxes, showing many symptoms of serious decline but also grasping at a future linked to renewable energy, green business and tourism. The paradoxes are not accidents. They arise from a resilient community that has worked hard to turn setbacks into opportunities. Volunteers have sustained the quality of life in the town, The South Kintyre Development Trust, the Machrihanish Airbase Community Company, the Kintyre Amenities Trust and the Picture House all testify to the innovation, vision and capacity to deliver. Several organisations were working on HLF and Big Lottery bids at the time of our visit. By working together with the local authority, the Scottish Government and bodies like HIE and Historic Scotland these local groups have sustained this small community through a long period of decline. Public and private sectors are disinvesting from many small towns; others could learn from Campbeltown's community based organisations.

Last but not least there are messages for Scottish Government. In particular, rural policy needs to recognise the importance of small towns like Campbeltown. These towns have a two-way relationship with the wider rural economy. Supporting initiatives to make Campbeltown, and towns like it, more attractive places for residents and visitors should be part of the government's rural strategy.

Photos:

- of Campbeltown Harbour showing the wind towers being loaded onto a boat courtesy of Cliff Hague.



- of the restored Royal Hotel courtesy of Argyll and Bute Council.
- of the The Picture House from the loch courtesy of Martin Hadlington, Conservation Architect. The Picture House is the white building, and next to it is the Burnet Building.