



## Small Towns Initiative: Cupar Report



A report by BEFS Chairman, Professor Emeritus Cliff Hague and Amanda Sherrington based on a visit to Cupar in July 2014 as part of BEFS' Small Towns Initiative.



***“The old market town of Cupar lies in the heart of the fertile Howe of Fife. Easy to get to, Easy to park in, and Easy to find most items on your shopping list. Cupar, why go anywhere else?”***

These headline phrases on the Cupar [website](#) project a clear and confident self-identity. As an accessible market town, with supermarkets, restaurants, and traditional independent shops, Cupar has significant assets. The challenge for the future is to manage the development pressures and opportunities through a period of change. More specifically, can it benefit from the attractions it offers as a commuter town while “re-localising” some of the activities that traditionally sustained

the community, and in particular its town centre?

Today, Fife’s [ninth](#) largest town is a popular and attractive place to live. Located by the small winding River Eden, the medieval townscape has high historic and picturesque quality. The town is easily accessible, with excellent transport links to St. Andrews, less than 10 miles east, Dundee, less than 15 miles to the north, and frequent trains for the hour-long journey to central Edinburgh.

Over the last 25 years, the town has been growing. There were 7,545 inhabitants in 1991, 8,675 in 2001 and [9,339](#) by 2011. Much of this growth has been accommodated in, and driven by, new suburban housing development at low densities: Cupar has been spreading as well as growing.

Administrative and economic changes pose threats to the use and maintenance of properties that have played an important functional and visual role in defining Cupar. Investment in new development to accommodate growth needs to be balanced with reinvestment in the historic fabric if the town is to continue to thrive. To achieve this, cooperation will be needed between investors, local government, historic environment agencies, and, not least, community organisations. The future of the town centre is crucial.

### **A town with history**

The town grew at the crossroads of routes from Edinburgh to Dundee, and from Falkland to St. Andrews. It is thought to have developed around the castle of Cupar, now an archaeological site replaced by the former Castle Hill School. The castle and seat of the earls of Fife, was once the residence of the Thane of Fife, Macduff, and scene for the tragedy which inspired Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The castle also housed the first performance of *Ane Pleasant Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* by Sir David Lindsay in 1535, a landmark event in Scottish [theatrical history](#).

As the former Royal Burgh and important medieval market town, Cupar boasts many impressive historic buildings, particularly in its town centre. Examples include the former Corn Exchange, the County Buildings, the former Burgh Chambers, St Catherine Street and



one of the former jails (now a pub and nightclub). The Duncan Institute in Crossgate houses the library. The Mercat Cross and the space at the junction of Crossgate and Bonnygate help identify the town's historic trading function.

Cupar was designated a Conservation Area in 1974, and as 'outstanding' in 1984. Cupar Conservation Area delineates the medieval town's three oldest roads, Bonnygate, Crossgate and Kirkgate, and adjoining townscape in which rigg patterns are still prominent with the town's closes an attractive and publicised feature. It also takes in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century developments to the north, east and south of the medieval town. Interpretive plaques on buildings throughout this area help to explain the town's history.

### **Transport infrastructure, Accessibility and Resilience**

In the early 1970s the town suffered two major "shocks" over which it had no control. The large sugar beet factory on the edge of town, an icon of the town's agricultural role, closed in 1972. Then local government reorganisation in 1975 removed Fife County Council, and shifted the main centre for local administration to Glenrothes. These events could easily have triggered a spiral of decline, and indeed the market closed in 1994, a further reflection of the changes in agriculture in the hinterland. However, the town has grown and its demographic structure is broadly similar to that of Scotland as a whole, though with a rather lower proportion in the economically active age band and a higher proportion of pensioners. The site of the former sugar beet factory is now an industrial estate.

Some agricultural activities have been retained, with substantial grain milling and food processing plants on the outskirts, and there are local jobs in the NHS, local government and legal services – all again legacies of Cupar's former administrative status. Nevertheless, the key to the town's resilience has been its accessibility. Transport infrastructure of national significance connects residents not just to major employment centres, but to places offering well paid jobs.

Trains reach Edinburgh, one of the UK's most prosperous cities and strongest local economies, in about an hour, which is similar to the driving time. They run approximately every half hour during peak hours, and hourly during off-peak times during the week, hourly on Saturdays and every two hours on Sunday. The train services connect direct to major urban centres across England, and to London via Edinburgh. Trains to and from Dundee are hourly during the week, with additional services during peak times, with a travel time of about 20 minutes. Dundee provides a diverse range of jobs, and is a major centre for research in biotechnology.

Edinburgh airport provides global connectivity and is only 40 miles away. The M90 connects to the airport by a fast drive. The new Forth crossing is likely to ease some of the problems of congestion in reaching the airport.

Stagecoach bus services are available hourly to St. Andrews, where the university is a significant source of professional jobs. The travel time is 20 minutes. Perth is just under an hour away, though buses are not frequent throughout the day, and in general bus transport cannot compete in journey times with car use. Other employment centres easily reached by car include Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy. Not surprisingly, therefore, the majority of Cupar's economically active population travel to work by car. Cupar's car-based commuting figure, like that of other small towns in rural Fife, is above the Scottish average.

The town retains some of the professional services jobs that were originally linked to its county town / market town role. However, the closure of the Sheriff and District Courts is a blow to the town and particularly to the town centre. Other public services could also be vulnerable to centralisation, during the continuing restructuring of public spending in response to the financial and economic crisis that began in 2007.

Thus the medium term economic resilience of Cupar is likely to be increasingly tied to sustaining its role as a commuter town. However, there are also vulnerabilities here, perhaps most notably with respect to possible rationalisations of public transport and rising costs of car-based commuting. An aging population could also be a challenge.

### **Community engagement: A force for resilience**

A further positive feature that has helped the town to remain attractive is the active engagement of some of its citizens. During the summer, this is most apparent in the work of 'Cupar in Bloom'. This is a voluntary group formed in 2004, which has enthusiastically and successfully initiated a town beautification project. This includes 200 hanging baskets and 120 planters, as well as new litter bins bearing the inscription "Take a Pride in Cupar." Together these local initiatives project extremely positive messages. The long list of local supporters and sponsors demonstrates the capacity of local businesses to actively support town improvement initiatives.

A further sign of local networks to promote the town is the [website](#) and leaflet that have been developed by the local Association of Businesses in Cupar and District. These promote local shops, restaurants and private service providers, but also contain information about local organisations and events. They have attractive images that depict the historic environment, local food, the town in its landscape setting, highland games and the flowers and bandstand in the Haugh Park. Taken together they present a strong narrative about the town as a traditional Scottish small town that can offer 21<sup>st</sup> century services of quality, though young people are not visible in any of them. There has also been a successful experiment with a dedicated town centre manager.

There are a significant number of community groups and organisations in the town. Many of them are very actively involved in public life. Examples include the [Rotary](#), the [Round Table](#), the [YM/YWCA](#), [Cupar at Christmas](#) and [Sustainable Cupar](#), as well as bodies putting on the [Children's Gala](#) and the [Highland Games](#), and a small annual arts festival. [Cupar Heritage](#) is very active and innovative with a new visitor centre at the railway station, and an established culture of interest in the town's history, not least in its military pedigree as the historic base of the Fife & Forfar Yeomanry, whose successor Army Reserve unit supports an active branch



of the Royal British Legion. The [Cupar & North Fife Preservation Society](#) is active both in the detail of the town's Built Environment and in the strategy for the town's future.

There is an active [Community Council](#), though some see it as mainly reflecting the voice of older people. Sports Clubs particularly are growing considerably, though the cricket club folded some years ago. The [Howe of Fife RFC](#) also runs teams for young players. The club is about to embark on the construction of major new facilities at its pitches, adjacent to the town's existing sports centre and swimming

pool, for the use of all of the town's clubs. There is a strong sports culture in the town, which has two golf clubs.

Overall the picture is of an impressive level of citizen engagement in voluntary activities within the town. However, the number and diversity of bodies means that it is difficult for them to really come together to form a concerted vision for Cupar's future. Stronger networking and cross-cutting activities could further strengthen the capacity of the town to focus efforts and achieve synergies.

### **A changing role for the town centre**

Changing shopping patterns and centralisation of public services have created problems in the centres of many small towns across and beyond Scotland. There is general agreement on the need to find innovative uses for empty properties, some temporary such as "pop up" shops, others more permanent such as housing. However, issues of property ownership, unrealistic rental expectations and lack of market confidence are hurdles that have to be overcome.

Currently, the situation in Cupar is not as problematic as it is in some towns elsewhere in Scotland. However, there are signs of fragility and a risk that deterioration could inflict long lasting damage to the town. While empty shops are not conspicuous, the presence of charity shops is. The removal of the courts directly creates vacant property and threatens to have knock-on effects to the strong presence of legal services in the town. Historic buildings that are keystones within the Outstanding Conservation Area are standing empty. Furthermore, there is visible evidence that many older properties now need investment in maintenance.

The medieval townscape of the town centre boasts many important historic buildings. There are however 10 buildings in Cupar which appear on the [Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland](#). Only two, the former Bell Baxter High School buildings on West Port and the former works on North Burnside, are in the progress of being restored. Although there is evident support within the town for conserving the richness of its built heritage, ongoing maintenance and finding uses for vacant buildings is an issue which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The B-listed Former Burgh Chambers in particular occupies a critical corner site at the very heart of the town but is empty. The recently announced Historic Scotland funding for a Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme presents a vital opportunity. Every effort should be made to create a catalytic effect, leveraging in other investment and mobilising property owners and local traders to initiate complementary actions of their own.

For example there is some market demand for small industrial and commercial floorspace: can the right fabric and rental conditions be supplied?

The innovation of locating the monthly farmers' market in the Crossgate, at centre of the town, links in to the [Fife Diet](#). Local food networks are currently the leading example of re-localisation. A related initiative worth looking at is the Incredible [Edible Network](#). The Network aims to provide access to good local food for all, through working together, learning from field to classroom to kitchen, and supporting local business. The presence of the Scottish Rural College in the town could maybe assist in building awareness and local food initiatives. Local artists have already provided some murals around the town centre: is there scope to extend that initiative and focus it towards images celebrating local food and healthy living?

The town has three supermarkets (and approval for a fourth), restaurants which are improving in quality and variety, traditional independent shops and even a nightclub (at weekends). However, shopping habits are changing. E-commerce and falling real wages seem to be contributing to a decline in the pull of large out-of-town superstores, while smaller convenience stores have gained ground. There could be niches here that innovative traders could capitalise upon in a town like Cupar, which still has an attractive centre.

Commuting is also likely to influence shopping habits: where and when do commuters shop, and what opportunities are there to boost more use of local shops? These questions cannot be answered in a report like this based on a short visit to the town, but they are strategic concerns for Cupar and similar small towns. The "Cupartown" website does showcase local traders, and some web-based businesses have been set up in the town; however, more of the local retailers could seek to build an online presence, to draw customers from outside the town's limits.

The gateways to the town have strong visual markers, and create an immediate feeling that this is an attractive place. A similar approach might be taken to delineating the town centre. Recent improvements to the traffic flow through the town centre have alleviated traffic and congestion, and made the area more attractive to non-motorists, while also improving air quality but there may be some evidence that just below 50% continues to be through traffic and therefore a reduction would be to the benefit of pedestrians and cyclists. There remains little provision for cyclists, whether in terms of cycle racks or dedicated cycle lanes. The invitation extended to the Disability Group to review and report on the accessibility of the town centre for all is a welcome initiative.

In a town the size of Cupar, cycling and walking can potentially be very good means to access the town centre, especially if local stores will also provide a delivery service for large or bulky goods. Promoting health benefits could have synergies with the emphasis on local food and the town's sports facilities. Projecting the demography forward, might Cupar also think about what "healthy aging" might imply for a town development strategy?

Haugh Park adds to the appeal of the core part of the town, and is very visible to drivers passing through. However, the river remains an under-used asset for the most part, even as it passes along the side of the park. Because of the multiplicity of land owners along the banks any attempt to improve access to – or even the visibility of the river - will need to be a



long term project, and require much negotiation. It might be the basis for an ideas competition to explore what improvements might be possible in the short term.

Given these constraints within the town, there is a case for looking at how to better exploit the river as a sub-regional asset that could funnel people into the centre of Cupar. For example, a cycling / walking route along the valley could also project Cupar as a “rest and refreshment” point along the way, and again add to the narrative of an active, attractive and healthy town. However, any actions along the

river should also be informed by water management in the context of possible risks from more extreme weather conditions linked to climate change.

### **New housing development**

Proposals for further development of new housing in the north of the town have been met with a negative response by some in the town. However, development pressure is unlikely to go away, precisely because Cupar has a lot to offer. The challenge is to ensure that new development enhances the qualities of the town, rather than undermines them and good integration is therefore vital. New residents can help sustain the local services that benefit others in the town. The location, form, design and development of any new housing should seek to integrate the new with the rest of the town. How can the development strengthen, not dilute, the sense that Cupar is a special and distinctive place? The potential for housing above shops or in disused buildings within the historic part of the town should be actively explored to complement development of new family housing in suburban sites.

Some residents and committed community organisations whose activity benefits the town feel that they have had insufficient involvement in some development projects. Their concern is not restricted to new development by volume house builders. It extends, for example, to anxieties about the use of gap sites within the fabric of the town.

### **Education and innovation**

The schools and colleges are very important. They are part of Cupar’s appeal to incomers, especially young families. They provide the lifeblood for the future Cupar. They include two primary schools and the well-respected Bell Baxter High School, as well as the campus of Fife College, and the Scottish Rural College’s two campuses. The High School generates some lunch time trade for local businesses, but the full potential of integrating these educational facilities into the life and governance of the town remains under-exploited. For example, traditional “silo” style funding and practices mean that the facilities of the Schools are used only by pupils of the schools and only at times convenient to the schools.

Potentially the schools can be a catalyst for bringing together different generations, and for reinforcing messages about the identity and special strengths of the town. While the High School has built links with the colleges, the connections to the Business Association and to the leading civic associations in the town appear not yet made.



The universities in Dundee and St Andrews also provide potential opportunities to spin-off businesses linked to knowledge and creative industries. Cupar is quite accessible to all three universities, and could look to actively build collaborative links. For example, the town could be used for student design projects, or more ambitiously seek to house small research teams who are in need of new office space and can easily work remotely from main campuses by using the internet. Again, branding the town through initiatives such as those suggested above as part of a re-localisation strategy (e.g. “healthy aging”) could

enhance its appeal to researchers in related fields. There is a proposal for a design competition for the landscaping of the gap site beside the War Memorial.

### **An inclusive town**

A town that is growing needs to be an inclusive town, welcoming newcomers into its midst. This partly depends on the actions of individuals, but initiatives by organisations can also help. For example, schools can be a critical part of the welcome experience, as well as a means of meeting and integrating people new to the town. The involvement of the Disability Group in reviewing accessibility in the centre is a positive step towards an inclusive Cupar.

Cupar is fortunate in not having the scale of deprivation found in some small towns and in the large cities. However, an area of Cupar Central fell into the most deprived 15% of datazones in Scotland in 2012 for the first time.

In general, there is little evidence that the voices of the town’s young people figure in discussions about development and the future of Cupar. There are facilities for young people – not only the YM/YWCA, the Reserve Army, the two uniformed youth organisations (based in the other former jail) and sports facilities, but also a youth café. The meeting facilities in the recently developed Old Parish Centre see strong demand. However, it is not clear whether there are gaps in provision, e.g. in relation to gender.

The town is fortunate in having a recently re-built health centre, housing both the town's GP practices, adjoining a small cottage hospital, though these are a small distance from the town centre.

### **Looking ahead**

Cupar has proved resilient to past crises. It currently faces another through the closure of the Courts, and an on-going challenge to sustain the economy and the buildings of its town centre. Because the town has so many positive features, and local campaigners have only so much energy and time to devote to civic life, there is a risk that complacency could displace the need for innovative action. The maintenance and vacancy of older buildings are “timebomb” issues that could prompt an unexpected crisis in the future.

While rightly cherishing the legacies from the past, that contribute so much to Cupar today, people and organisations in the town could also undertake some thinking about possible



futures. For example, as the uses and impacts of information technology expand, might commuting become unnecessary? What could the town do to make it easier and more profitable for people who are currently spending an hour or more a day travelling to and from work, to spend more time in Cupar? How can the skills and experience of the increasing numbers of retired people in Cupar be put to good effect for their personal benefit and for the benefit of the town? Will the Community Empowerment legislation offer a means to find new uses for some of the historic buildings? How can the current level of public services be sustained in the face of increasingly severe reductions in public spending and the capacity of local government? What opportunities could come from looking at

the town in its sub-regional context as a hub in the Eden Valley? Is there opportunity for an off-road cycle route to pass through Cupar, maximising its proximity to National Route 1 of the National Cycle Network?

A serious issue is the lack of a hotel. Given the proximity to St Andrews, might Cupar provide a different and more affordable tourism offering as a base for visiting St Andrews, the East Neuk, the National Trust gems at Hill Of Tarvit, Falkland and Kellie, and Dundee which has a wide selection of family attractions, including museums, and will soon welcome the Victoria & Albert?

## Summary

In many ways Cupar is a successful small town. It has used its accessibility, high quality historic environment, good public services and well-regarded educational institutions to adjust to change over the last 40 years. In looking to build resilience into the future, it is important to recognise the challenges that the town now faces, particularly in its town centre. The active citizens and networks of businesses prepared to support the town are a vital asset. However, the networks could be strengthened and extended – both within and beyond the town. New development can help to sustain services and bring in people with new skills and ideas.

Overall, this report suggests that the concept of “re-localisation” could provide an underlying focus or “philosophy” to shape attitudes and actions in the town. This could be given greater substance through a sharper focus on the special qualities of Cupar, and suggestions have been made that this could be expressed through a branding emphasising health, quality of life and a shared sense of place, which extends to seeing the town in its regional context. However, re-localisation is not an easy option, as evidenced by the recent centralisations of services like the police and the Courts. It should be seen as a way to adapt and build resilience in the face of restructuring of the town by externally imposed change.