



SMALL TOWNS INITIATIVE: DUMFRIES REPORT



This report by BEFS Chairman, Professor Emeritus Cliff Hague, is based on a visit to Dumfries in November 2012 as part of BEFS' Small Towns Initiative.



At around 37,000 some would argue that Dumfries is too large to be a “small town”. However, small towns come in all shapes and sizes, and any upper threshold is necessarily arbitrary. Certainly its size gives Dumfries some advantages in comparison to smaller places. The key question then is how well these advantages are being used?

Dumfries is part of a network of small towns in the South West of Scotland, and the regional capital. Dumfries and Galloway Council covers an extensive area, stretching to the Irish Sea to Moffat, and from the Solway Firth to beyond Sanquhar, and serves a population approaching 150,000. The fact that the Council headquarters are in Dumfries town centre thus constitutes a significant benefit in terms of professional job opportunities. The main regional hospital is also in Dumfries. Another example of the benefits of scale that Dumfries enjoys is the Oasis Youth Centre, in a former school not far from the town centre. It houses a state of the art recording and rehearsal studio, dark room, performance area, drama/dance workshop area, café, computer room and meeting rooms.

Retail

The town has also been the top of the retail hierarchy in the region. However, here as elsewhere the retail function is somewhat fragile. The collapse of Woolworth's led to the closure of its store on the High St. There is still a Marks and Spencer, and both Debenhams and Iceland have recently filled empty units. Nevertheless, there is competition from within and out with the region, along with the ever-growing market in internet shopping. Government Planning Inspectors have allowed the development of shopping centres on the edge of town that are strangling the town centre stores. In addition, there is an Outlet Village at nearby Gretna, and Dumfries residents also travel further afield in search of a wider choice and higher end quality that is on offer in Carlisle and Ayr.

These forces, combined with the depressed economy and unsympathetic action by banks, mean that many traditional High St businesses are under intense pressure. However, the Dumfries Retailers Association are co-operating in a “Shop Local” campaign. They also use the internet to promote [Dumfries](#). This is the main internet site marketing the town, though also see [Undiscovered Scotland](#). The Council's own website covers Dumfries and Galloway as a whole, and the Visit Scotland website also focuses on the region rather than the town.

Built environment

The High St itself is an asset to the town, despite some blemishes. It is long, pedestrianized and includes clear landmarks, notably the Mid Steeple tower (dating from 1708) and a fountain. There is a strong vista to a Robert Burns statue and the Greyfriars Church at one end, and enticing glimpses down to the river through the streets and wynds. While there are local voices that advocate restoring traffic to the High Street in the hope of increasing trade, that would surely be a regressive step. It would undermine the quality of the safe and attractive environment that now exists without impacting on the underlying problems that all High Streets

now face. Meanwhile, Dumfries Academy and other schools are close to the centre of the town.

There are three Conservation Areas and a new Conservation Area Appraisal is under way, with the intention to consolidate the three into one substantial Conservation Area. There has been investment in enhancement of important spaces in the centre – in Friars Vennel and around the Mid Steeple, and at Plain Stanes. Devorgilla's Bridge across the River Nith dates from the 15th century and is the oldest multi-spanned bridge in Scotland.

In Friars Vennel (a medieval street) there is an interpretive panel on the site of the Greyfriars Monastery depicting Robert the Bruce killing his rival John Comyn. This is just one of many sites in Dumfries with connections to Bruce or to Robert Burns. Good interpretive walking train leaflets can be picked up at the Tourist Information Centre which is centrally located.

Another potentially valuable historical link is to J.M.Barrie, who as a child played in Moat Brae, a B-listed Georgian town house designed by Walter Newall. Barrie called it the “enchanted land” and its terraced riverside garden was “Neverland”: the connection to Peter Pan is evident. However, Moat Brae was semi-derelict for a long time. Now it is being restored with grants from Historic Scotland. The Peter Pan Moat Brae Trust is a volunteer-led effort that has formed numerous partnerships to take forward its vision of restoring the property and creating a centre for children’s literature and a learning garden.

Queen Street, close to the town centre, but rather run down, is to be the focus for a Street Design regeneration project with community involvement a key theme. Grants will be available to property owners, and for environmental improvements, including street lighting and renewal of Victorian features such as cast iron railings. Eight houses will be built on gap sites funded by the Scottish Government’s affordable housing programme. In small towns, small scale projects are likely to have a bigger relative impact than in larger settlements, and hopefully this will prove a case in point.

A changing role for the town centre?

How to retain the town centre as a vital space where people meet, and which embodies the character and collective purpose of the town? Uses are changing. The former post office became a dental health centre. On the day of our visit, by the Mid Steeple, a Latino band, complete with sombrero, was energetically and melodiously rendering their version of “Delilah” to a small but appreciate audience (it was a damp morning in mid-November!). There is a theatre in town, but also ambitions to create a cultural centre at the heart of the town, which could include workshops and act as a hub for creative artists. Such an initiative could help build an evening economy. Currently there is a sports and entertainment centre, DG One, which opened in 2006 and is close to the town centre. The town also has an Odeon cinema: though it only has one screen, it is again located on the edge of the centre. There is also potential for increased residential use in the centre, through developers and housing associations.

Environmental sustainability

The broad and powerful River Nith is an impressive feature of the town. However, floods have affected the adjacent Whitesands area, including Friars Vennel, as recently as 2009. Recently a design charrette was held to explore ways in which the flood threat might be managed. The proposed masterplan aims to create an elevated and landscaped walkway through what is currently a car park area, so that the banks of the river are raised, affording protection to the low ground between the river and the streets leading off the High St. This seems to be a sensible and well considered proposition.

Dumfries also benefits from being at the hub of a regional public transport service, as well as having a railway line connecting to Glasgow and Carlisle. The Council's GoSmart project encourages and supports sustainable modes of transport. For example there are "GoBikes" available for hire, cycle routes, and bus time displays at bus stops.

The Crichton Campus and "The Learning Town"

The development of the former mental hospital estate at the Crichton estate into an education campus and business park is an outstanding example of innovation. When the Health Board sought to dispose of the campus in the 1990s, the Council had the vision and capacity to acquire the site and use it to create a base for higher education in a town and region where many able young people left for university and never returned. Now the Crichton has arms of University of Glasgow and University of the West of Scotland, a research unit of the Scottish Rural University, and also the Dumfries and Galloway FE College. The Open University and the Crichton Carbon Centre are also there. There is a hotel and conference centre and the impressive church is a popular venue for weddings and graduations. However, the lack of local critical mass, and the distance from the major cities make it difficult to realise the full potential of the Crichton for business conferences and associated tourism.

The latest piece in this jigsaw is the Dumfries Learning Town's Schools Innovation Initiative. This would see a restructuring of education in the town, with the concentration of post-15 education on the Crichton Campus. This would create critical mass for specialist subjects in the later years of schooling, but also strengthen the physical links between schools and further and higher education. Amongst other benefits, it seems likely that this would encourage progression for students without previous family experience of higher education.

Governance

The Council and the Health Board remain important to sustaining the town and its services. Now more than ever, it is important for institutions to work together locally and to connect vertically from European to local level. In Dumfries, the Chamber of Commerce is working positively with the Council, and the Loreburn Community Council is active in the town centre. There is an active Town centre forum and the work of the Retailers Association has already been highlighted. There is also a **Civic Pride** volunteer group. The vitality of such bodies can help to sustain the appeal of the town and its sense of identity. The practical benefit of such locally based, but more widely connected, public / private / voluntary sector initiatives is well demonstrated by the Moat Brae example outlined earlier.

Looking forwards

Dumfries has significant assets. Its historical legacy from Burns and Robert the Bruce, and its built environment heritage are being used to advantage. The Crichton is an excellent example of how built (and natural) environmental heritage can be used innovatively and sensitively to position a town in the knowledge economy. The size of the town, and its regional capital status, is reflected in its capacity to offer better transport and entertainment facilities, better hotels and a wider choice of skilled jobs than smaller towns can manage. Nevertheless, there are grounds for arguing that the town and the region are too often overlooked within Scotland, where the “rural” story is dominated by the Highlands, and the “urban” by the main cities. One intriguing question is how Scottish independence could impact on Dumfries? Potentially it could make more options for EU cross-border funding. Would Dumfries become a “gateway” – or is it just too far from the main road and rail links to the south, and from an airport?

The town and region have attracted a retiree population. They can offer house prices that are more affordable than in larger centres and a sense of a slower, better quality of life. This demographic is often seen in negative terms because of the demands it places on health and care services. However, it can also be an asset if its potential for volunteering and experience and connections to businesses outside the region can be tapped.

Paradoxical as it may seem, this older age group could also help to strengthen the narrative of “The Learning Town” through ideas like the University of the Third Age, or through mentoring of the students on the Crichton Campus. Against that is the risk that higher education will undergo a fundamental restructuring as on-line providers put competitive pressure on the more expensive campus-based forms of delivery.

If “The Learning Town” is to become the brand for Dumfries, then it needs wider buy-in and more focused promotion. The Crichton is at the edge of town: how might the idea of learning be used to infuse and revitalise the town centre? Moat Brae could play an important part with a focus on early learning and play. Could you learn about climate change and flood risk management from the river? Design principles and conservation know-how from the High Street? How to play a trumpet from a Latino band?