

## SMALL TOWNS INITIATIVE: ELGIN REPORT



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



Each small town is unique. However, Elgin is perhaps the closest we can get to what people might imagine a “typical” Scottish small town to be, complete with whisky and shortbread. Like many places in Scotland it is close to the coast but also offers easy access to attractive upland landscapes. It serves a rural hinterland. It is reasonably accessible to a larger urban centre. It has a population of around 21,000 but a catchment of 100,000, and functions as a sub-regional centre.

The architecture and street pattern in its historic core imparts a sense of place and of Scottish identity. The residents are proud of their town. However, Elgin, like all small towns, is also faced with today’s economic and environmental challenges. Charting a new future will require skilled and inclusive decision making.

### **A historic town with stories to tell**

The historic built environment is integral to the way that residents and visitors experience Elgin as a place. At different levels for different people, it tells the stories of what Elgin is, and why it is how it is. It is a gem in its own right, but also shares qualities with other towns across Morayshire, contributing both to the diversity within Scotland and to a cultural narrative of Scotland as a place.

Lady Hill to the west with its castle, and to the east the ruins of the great cathedral, still stake out the town that was made a Royal Burgh in the thirteenth century. As you shuffle through the narrow pends and wynds that lead to and from the old cobbled market place at the heart of the town, you brush close to life and work amongst the craftsmen and merchants of medieval Elgin, a town thriving amidst the rich agricultural area around. In the spacious and elegant central space, the Plainstones, you see preserved in the buildings the gush of wealth that came this way between 1820 and 1840, and the sense of civic pride with which it was invested. That iconic Victorian institution, the railway, came to the southern outskirts of the growing town; that station is reached through streets of stern, stone terraces and villas, the epitome of nineteenth century Calvinist respectability.

### **The Town Centre**

The town centre is the heart of the historic part of the town. Like a number of the other small towns that BEFS has visited, it has benefited from investment through the Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme (CARS) and also from the Town Centre Regeneration Fund (TCRF). It is one of the case studies in a study for the Scottish Government of [town centre regeneration](#). In addition Moray council has undertaken [health checks on the town centre](#) in 2010 and 2012.

The TCRF work is part of the Moray Towns Together TCRF project, which aims to enhance the main towns as the economic drivers of the region. The project comprises a number of streetscape improvements aimed to make the town centre more accessible to all. These include 'iKiosks' and information points located in car parks, and a shopfront improvement scheme. The project is linked to the development of the Elgin Business Improvement District (BID) and Moray Towns Partnership (MTP). It is backed by Business Gateway and Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE). The project is also linked to Elgin City of the Future, an initiative that is looking to co-ordinate a number of substantial capital development projects for Elgin over the next 10 years.

Despite the success of the CARS and the TCRF initiatives, the town centre, like so many others, is under pressure. Vacancies amongst former retail units are especially noticeable on the secondary streets. Around the Plainstones upper levels are under-utilised. There is recognition amongst stakeholders that charity shops and "bargain stores" can give the centre a down market feel, but faced with the alternative of vacancy, this is something to live with. One of the strengths of the centre at the moment is the relatively high proportion of independent, locally run businesses trading there. These include some stores trading well up the value chain. The presence of these and other local firms may well have given the BID some impetus.

The BID has real ambitions for Elgin and provides a key way of linking public and private endeavour in the town. However, some of the threats to the town centre originate in matters that are beyond its control. There is concern that high rateable values disadvantage the town centre here – and elsewhere. This compounds the problem of rents that may be unrealistically high, with banks and other property owners reluctant to reduce them as doing so would impact adversely on asset values.

Part of the problem that the town centre faces is competition from a large retail centre just south of the railway. This has attracted some of the chain stores that in an earlier age would have located in the town centre. In the present economic climate there are vacant units on this retail park too, but overall it seems clear that such developments do little to sustain conservation of the retail units in the main historic part of town. A further issue for the centre is the extent to which it is cut off to the north by the main A96 road that runs east-west through the town.

### **Some leading companies**

Elgin is home to some companies with a national and international profile. Johnson's cashmere is an important tourist draw, and there is also Baxters, a leading food processing company. The shortbread and oatcakes come from Walkers, a household name, and the local distillery is Glen Moray. Services dominate the local economy, though manufacturing also accounts for a higher share of local jobs than it does across Scotland as a whole. However, this is a low wage economy and the council's economic strategy seeks to grow better paid jobs.



Defence employment has also been a traditional feature of this part of Scotland. RAF Lossiemouth continues to operate. The closure of RAF Kinloss in 2012 was a blow, though over 700 personnel from 39 Engineer Regiment subsequently moved into the base.

### **Education**

Like many small towns in rural parts of Scotland, Elgin has traditionally suffered a haemorrhage of its brightest young people to higher education in the larger cities. There is still a significant loss of people in the 20-30 age cohort. The economic strategy seeks to grow life sciences and there are partnerships between NHS Grampian, Moray College (part of the University of the Highlands and Islands) and the private sector. More

needs to be done to promote careers in the hospitality industry through partnerships with local schools. The Celtic Fringe project achieved some successes in this respect.

### **Environment**

The town has suffered from floods on the River Lossie in recent years. Flood defence work was underway at the time of the visit. The environmental quality of the wider region is undoubtedly an asset for Elgin. Stronger links with the Cairngorms National Park might help to capitalise more on this potential.

### **Deprivation**

There are small areas of in North East Elgin and in New Elgin that show up in the Scottish Government's analysis of deprivation. In these areas the issues are income and employment deprivation and crime.

### **The Future**

In our meeting with local stakeholders we spent a lot of time discussing the future of Elgin. The discussions were framed by work already done by the Moray Community Planning Partnership which has produced "Elgin – City for the Future" and [The Moray Economic Strategy](#). A strong theme in these reports is the aspiration to diversify the economic base of Elgin, away from "over-reliance" on public administration and defence. There are also calls for strong local leadership.

Elgin – City for the Future sets out five inter-related "Platforms" on which to build. These are:

- Elgin High Street – "the most important economic space in the region";
- Innovation in technology and business – with a particular stress on addressing under-performance in retailing;
- Education and Health – highlighting the potential of Moray College and the regional teaching hospital;

- The visitor economy – a sector in which Elgin is seen as having untapped potential; and
- Arts, culture and heritage – which is seen to have economic potential but also to be a means for community engagement.

Our discussions ranged over a number of specific ideas. These included:

- The potential of the Lossie Green area, which is currently severed from the High Street by the A96. Mixed used development, with a bus station, a new civic square and a more pedestrian-friendly environment is envisaged.
- Finding non-retail uses to sustain and grow the vitality of the town centre. Art students from Moray College might also be encouraged to experiment in re-using empty shops as workspace / exhibition spaces if the properties could be made temporarily available at a notional rent. Given the importance of the built environment heritage a demonstration / practice workshop for maintenance of traditional buildings might be a possibility.
- More specifically there was seen to be potential to create an evening economy. One way to do this might be to attract touring companies to put on shows in the St Giles church. There may be scope for student accommodation in under-used buildings. Other ideas were for events, particularly in the dark winter months, that would draw residents and visitors into the town centre. Currently there isn't a culture of eating out during the winter nights, though people will drive to Inverness to go to a multiplex cinema.
- Beware that the present difficult economic climate could force poor short term decisions that have long-term impacts.

It was clear that the BID provides an important catalyst for mobilising local businesses and organisations. However, there was also recognition of the need to reach out more to the young people of Elgin. How do they see Elgin going forward? Similarly, the role of unconventional businesses such as social enterprises, and community asset ownership seem likely to develop in the future. What can be done to help them? Could large local companies help?

## Summary

Elgin has strengths, notably its high quality historic environment and its role as a sub-regional centre. However, the retail function in the town centre is vulnerable, in part because of the more peripheral shopping areas that have developed in the last 20 years. Securing the future of the centre is the main challenge. The BID is doing valuable work in bringing together a range of players. In the short to medium term new uses or multiple uses are going to have to be found for some town centre premises and sites. The Elgin- City of the Future masterplan ideas and the Moray Economic Strategy align the endeavours of local public sector actors. However, there also needs to be action at the level of the Scottish Government, in particular to address the issue of rateable values.

Elgin could usefully sharpen the image that it seeks to portray and enhance its web presence and branding. There would indeed seem to be potential in tourism and in making the town a more attractive destination for evening entertainment and eating. The environmental works being undertaken on the River Lossie, and the ideas for making the town more pedestrian and

cyclist friendly could also help. The involvement of the town's young people and of Moray College could be a way forward.

### Article in the Press and Journal about the Elgin visit