



SMALL TOWNS INITIATIVE: HELENSBURGH REPORT

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

“A great place to live”, “A beautiful town”. These were the first reactions of some residents describing Helensburgh when BEFS conducted its “health check” there. These sentiments explain why this small town continues to attract residents and visitors. Like a number of other Scottish small towns that are accessible to major employment centres, and have been able to conserve the quality of their environment, Helensburgh can tell a positive story and offer ideas for similar places. However, there are also challenges to be faced. This report provides a snapshot of the town, in the hope that it can prompt some ideas and action for the future.

A well designed town in an outstanding setting

The town was planned and developed in the late 18th century. Its origins are as a spa and resort on the Firth of Clyde. Helensburgh still benefits from the legacy of the original plan. The formal grid layout of the town with its wide streets echoes the elegance of the Edinburgh new town. Money made in Glasgow was reinvested here in the built environment. At the top of the town, overlooking the Clyde, is [Hill House](#), Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s iconic domestic building commissioned by a wealthy publisher and built between 1901 and 1903. Over 20,000 people visit it every year, coming from all across the world. Let no one doubt the contribution that planning and good design can make to sustainable economic growth in Scotland.

The waterfront, and the views across the Firth of Clyde that it gives, are another major asset. At the time of our visit this part of town was suffering some disruption, with public realm improvement work under way. Argyll and Bute Council’s [CHORD Programme](#) (Campbeltown, Helensburgh, Oban, Rothsey and Dunoon) is working on town centre regeneration in each of the towns. In Helensburgh this involves £6.66M investment on redevelopment of the West Bay Esplanade and on traffic management in the town centre. The town is also the starting point for the Argyll Coastal Waters kayak trail.

The CHORD vision is to make Colquhoun Square an attractive public space that will support



cafes and shops in a high quality pedestrian-friendly environment. The town’s street grid has been retained east-west through the square, meaning that cars will still pass through, although slowing them down. The road will divide the space between north and south: how well this will work is yet to be seen.

Coloquhon Square Image ©Austin-Smith:Lord

The proximity to [Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park](#) is a further valuable asset. There are cycle paths and the [Three Lochs Way](#) walking route, which was mainly developed through the efforts of the Helensburgh and District Access Trust, a civil society charitable organisation. Further cycle links to the Clyde Naval Base and to Cardross are planned. Arguably more could be made of the proximity to the Park in promoting Helensburgh. Helensburgh will soon become the start/finish of the [John Muir Way](#).

In summary, Helensburgh is a prosperous town of elegant villas and attractive parks in an outstanding physical setting that is well-connected by public transport to the jobs in Glasgow. The risk in towns like this is not of precipitous decline, but rather of complacency and drift.

Threats and opportunities from development

The historic environment needs regular maintenance if its quality is to be retained. This will not be easy during the long period of economic difficulties that we are in. In particular, public funds are tight, and Argyll and Bute is not one of the growth areas of Scotland, so there is a risk that its budgets will diminish. The Clyde Street School has been on the [Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland](#) since 2009 and is recorded as being in poor condition. Work has recently started to redevelop the site as the new Civic Centre for Helensburgh with all Council offices brought into one location as well as a marriage/ceremony room and community space. This will enhance the eastern gateway to the town centre.

Nearby, in the woods outside Cardross are the ruins of the A-listed St Peter's Seminary that was built in 1958, but closed in 1980 and regularly vandalised since then. The latest proposals for [The Invisible College](#) offer hope that finally a viable future can be found for the site. Historic Scotland has granted £500,000 from its building repair fund. The town could benefit from this project if it is a success.

Planning control has an important part to play in ensuring that new development enhances rather than diminishes the quality of Helensburgh's built environment. The waterfront is a particularly sensitive area because of the views that it offers, but also because it is part of the town that draws visitors to activities. Some existing uses there do not add real value to the town. Though mass tourism has often created a brash townscape that can be exciting, it is important to think about what kind of tourist offer Helensburgh can make in the 21st century and match uses and design to that. The proposal for a [Scottish Submarine Centre](#) is exciting and promises to create a major new attraction, capitalising on the Clyde's long association with the development and operation of these vessels.

Similarly, pressure for housing development is entirely understandable given the attractions of the town and its accessibility. However the town is contained by a green belt. New housing can help sustain services and offset demographic ageing. Imaginative design should be encouraged in a town boasting architecture by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, William Leiper and Alexander Nisbet Paterson. Might there be scope for an annual prize to the best new or renovated building in town?

The local economy

Although a commuter town, Helensburgh has a significant local economy. The [Clyde Naval Base](#) is nearby, and with 6,500 civilians and service personnel working there is the biggest single site employer in Scotland. However, we were told that its local economic significance is less than might appear since in many ways the base is self-contained and many service personnel return to their home towns for the weekend. However, others estimate that the base

puts £90M a year into Helensburgh and Lomond, a significant figure by any standards. There would seem to be a case for forging stronger links between the base and the local area.

GSS marine Services operate from Rhu Marina. The company provides expert support for marine construction, engineering, repair and maintenance. It is a contractor to the Royal Navy and the civil maritime construction industry, as well as the growing offshore wind, wave and tidal energy field, both in Britain and Europe.

Fittingly in the town of Logie Baird, another innovative business is [Helensburgh and Lomond TV](#). It is part of Community News TV, which is a network offering hyper-local broadband TV. Helensburgh and Lomond TV uses the latest social networking, broadband and mobile technologies to help promote places, events and culture of and to local people. Use of such technologies potentially creates significant opportunities to Helensburgh to attract and foster people working from home but serving much wider markets, e.g. consultants and creative artists. There is a case for a concerted focus on growing IT-connected home-based enterprises in the town.

Retailing and the Town Centre

As in most towns, retailing is an important source of jobs, and integral to the town centre, which in turn sets much of the tone of the town. Similarly, retailing and the town centre here display many of the trends familiar across Scotland. There is a recently opened 25,000 sq feet Waitrose supermarket, a Farmfoods on the edge of the main town centre and a Co-op', along with some smaller general grocery stores. However, there are concerns that some of the smaller shops are struggling, and we were told that there were 31 vacant windows in the town centre. A bookshop closed, there are no fashionable clothes shops, and there are fears that coffee shops and charity shops are coming to dominate the centre.

The centre is quite small in size and there is a view that combined with the overall prosperity of the town this puts pressure on the local commercial property market, taking away flexibility and scope for new enterprises seeking low rent premises for the first year or so to get started. The Argyll and Bute Council does not own retail premises in Helensburgh, so has few levers to pull. The number of property owners is relatively small, some are local and in general they have confidence that they can achieve high rents, and so are content to let property lie empty until a willing tenant comes along. In turn this means that only high yielding businesses are likely to succeed in Helensburgh's town centre shops.

The lack of elasticity in rents, even during this prolonged period of economic difficulties, contrasts with the normal arrangements in suburban and out of town shopping developments where rents are linked to the turnover of the occupants. Until this difference can be addressed there will be vacant properties in the centres of our towns, including Helensburgh. The size of the units is a further problem. There are few larger units on the scale that many retailers now seek. Amalgamations of premises could be a way to tackle this, but unless ways can be found to broker deals between different owners this will not happen.

Social cohesion

Despite the general prosperity of the town, there are two datazones in East Helensburgh that are highlighted in the Scottish index of Multiple Deprivation as being in the 15% most deprived in the country, and indeed one of them is in the most deprived 5%. An ageing population may also present health challenges to Helensburgh in the future.

The local secondary school is Hermitage Academy which is located on the eastern edge of the town close to the new Waitrose supermarket. There are a range of youth groups in the town and a local hotel screens films two nights a week. The skatepark is in poor condition but a new one is included in the plans to re-develop the pier head site. Young people can commute from home to the higher education institutions in Glasgow and Paisley, but after graduation may need to move to access professional jobs and affordable housing.

The town has many voluntary organisations and an articulate population who are keen to have their say on Helensburgh's future. The challenge then is to harness what are at times disparate enthusiasms into a shared vision – or mutually reinforcing set of visions – for the town.

Summary

There are other small towns in Scotland that would envy Helensburgh's fortunes in terms of its location, built environment heritage, access to jobs and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, and local housing demand. It has important local sources of employment and innovative businesses, and its attractions give it good potential to grow small businesses through use of information technology. While there are concerns about the preponderance of cafes in the town centre, this is a tourist town, and cafes are the kind of personal service that cannot be dislodged by e-commerce. Investment in the public realm of the town through the CHORD project should enhance the attractiveness of the town centre and the Esplanade once the works are completed.

However, the town also has some areas of serious deprivation and affordable housing is limited. There is a risk that the population becomes increasingly elderly, and that a sclerosis settles over the retail properties in the town. A future scenario of genteel decline could be sketched. The challenge then is for Helensburgh to tap into the active civil society in the town in a way that will foster constant renewal. Specifically, issues that might open new opportunities include: the planned Scottish Submarine Centre; links (routes and promotional) into the national park; stronger involvement of young people and the secondary school in the life of the town; use of innovative modern design to complement the very real built environment heritage assets and in particular to better connect Hill House with other attractions. The Argyll and Bute Council could well be under increasing financial pressure in the coming years. Is there a way to create an innovative local institution that could focus civic society action in the town and work closely with the Council and other agencies such as Historic Scotland to steer its future?