



SMALL TOWNS INITIATIVE: STORNOWAY REPORT



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



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Islands are an important part of Scotland's territory and identity. Small towns are an integral part of island life. Thus any discussion about the present state and future prospects of Scotland's small towns needs to pay some attention to the situation of small towns on islands. While some challenges are shared with small towns on the mainland, especially remote towns such as

Campbeltown already covered in this BEFS initiative, insularity by its very nature creates a special set of circumstances. What can be the drivers of economic growth in an island, given that the local market is of limited size and adverse transport costs have to be overcome? How can the land / sea interface be managed in a sustainable way that also benefits the community? How can an island culture be conserved, yet tap into ideas and opportunities from outside?

Stornoway lies 30 miles off Scotland's coast and is the main seaport in the chain of Hebridean islands. It is the entry and exit point for people and goods coming to or leaving Lewis. It is the base for the Western Isles Council ([Comhairle nan Eilean Siar](#)). Thus its fortunes are influenced by and shape those of a much wider area. Although the population is only around 9,000, Stornoway is the largest town in the Western Isles and one of the largest on any of Scotland's islands.

A town with history

Once a Norse town, Stornoway has an active [Historical Society](#) which maintains a good website. This demonstrates the passion that residents and former residents have for the history of the town, and in particular its maritime heritage. One particularly interesting phase of the development of the town, and one which has had lasting effects, was the attempt by Lord Leverhulme at the end of the First World War to develop Stornoway as an industrial town, based on fish canning and distribution through his Mac Fisheries chain. He abandoned his plans when they met opposition, but in 1923 granted some of his property on the island to a trust, the Stornoway Trust, to administer for the people. The Trust therefore remains a potentially significant driver of development in the town. Decisions are taken by ten elected trustees.

The historic environment is recognised locally as an important asset and a key part of the town's attraction for tourists. A Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) ran 2007-12 and was a key part of the Council's regeneration strategy for Stornoway. It focused particularly on the

area around the harbour. The restoration of the former Town Hall was the centrepiece of the THI. As in so many small towns in Scotland (c.f. the [BEFS report on Campbeltown](#)), the town hall is an iconic building at the heart of the town, but lost its function with local government reorganisation. How best to use such an asset? In Stornoway, investment from the Council and the THI has delivered important improvements to the building, while retaining its character. Work included opening the ceiling of the main hall to natural lighting and providing windows at ground floor level that open the room to views of the street. It provides an attractive venue for weddings (the former Town Chamber is a Marriage Room) and other social events, as well as some office space. However, the full potential as a mixed use property providing facilities attracting residents and tourists is still some way short of being realised.

Another part of the THI saw the repaving of Cromwell St using natural Caithness slabs and granite blocks. Inscribed slabs relating the history of the property have been placed outside buildings fronting the street. Street furniture was also upgraded. Complementary public realm improvements were carried out to Perceval Square through the Town Centre Regeneration Fund.

Stornoway is also fortunate to have an excellent heritage of original Victorian iron railings around many of the houses and public buildings. In other parts of Scotland, the metal was requisitioned during World War II.

Another important project in which the Council and the Development Trust are partners is the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Parks for People which focuses on the Lews Castle and its grounds. The project promises to conserve and enhance the grounds and improve access and management. It will complement other conservation work on the Castle, including the museum and archive.

In short, investment by the Council, the Stornoway Trust and the HLF has helped conserve and enhance the quality of the historic built environment, and continues to do so. This has helped build business confidence in the town, as is reflected by the subsequent development of a number of specialist and high value shops and cafes. Thus the built environment work has helped to consolidate but also diversify the economic assets of the town.

The harbour and waterfront

Stornoway is a harbour town with a working harbour. The harbour is fundamental to the town's past and future. It is managed by the Stornoway Port Authority, which is governed by a Board of ten members, nine of whom are non-executive volunteers, each elected for a three-year term. There are no shareholders and any profits are reinvested for the benefit of the harbour and its stakeholders. Thus, as with the Stornoway Trust, we see important civic assets being managed by a body from the third sector, rather than by the Council or the conventional private sector.

The harbour is at a critical stage in its long history. Currently, two separate ferry boats provide connections to the mainland, one for passengers, the other for freight. However, the size of these boats constrains their capacity to operate in bad weather. From 2014 a single, larger ferry boat will come into use, able to operate in more difficult seas, and carrying both people



and goods. The single ship will yield economies in terms of fuel costs. Though the freight ferry is used overnight by Tesco to deliver produce to the island, the economics of a dedicated freight ferry were adversely affected by the loss of salmon processing from Stornoway. The change will mean that only one jetty will be used, rather than the two as at present. It will also influence the way that visitors and large lorries enter and leave the town centre.

Similarly, there has been a major change in the fishing industry that for a long time dominated the use of the harbour. The number of fishing boats is now reduced. In contrast cruise ships are a growth sector which will have a significant influence on the future of the harbour and the town. One current bottleneck onshore is the limited number of buses available to transport cruise holiday makers to the sites around Lewis. In 2012 the Port Authority also instigated a system of local volunteer guides to help cruise ship passengers find their way to the town's attractions.

Yachts are another growth sector, with the waters around the Hebrides a major attraction for leisure sailors. Here again getting the onshore / offshore relation right is vital, and so are the arrangements for berthing. The local airport, just ten minutes' drive from the harbour, makes it possible for yacht owners fly in and quickly reach their yacht moored here. There are plans to extend yacht berths so that they can take larger yachts. The benefits of the THI and the Parks for People project in presenting an attractive townscape as a backdrop for the yachting are important. Over the past decade there has been growth in local restaurants, which makes a berth in Stornoway more attractive, especially as the town centre is so close to the harbour.

Design, management and vitality in the town centre

The views to the town from across the water are a key part of the charm of Stornoway, along with the "buzz" from the working harbour. The strip of land between the harbour and the town is critically important. While improvements to the pedestrian realm have been delivered in this strip, there are still sections given over to car parking, and to the bus station. These uses present barriers between the town and the waterfront. In the Newton area, close to the town centre and the bus station, there are gas tanks and a mix of commercial uses which convey a less attractive picture of the town.

Part of the culture of many small towns is an expectation that people can drive into the centre and park their car if not actually right outside their destination, then no more than 100 yards from it! Over the past 40 years those Scots who live in the larger towns have been forced to shed such assumptions. Maintaining high levels of convenience and accessibility is important for town centres, but all too often an unquantified price can be paid in terms of the quality of a place if extensive and important spaces are given over to car parking. Stornoway has been able to create a good environment for pedestrians in the heart of the town.

The pending changes in the arrangements for the ferry and the plans for the yachts must be a catalyst for addressing parking provision and the design of circulation of vehicles and pedestrians in and around the town centre. The aim should be to push vehicles towards the edge and to enhance the public spaces with activity nodes, vistas and good quality lighting, paving and street furniture. The interface between the land and the sea is critical to the future identity of the town. As fishing takes a reduced role it is important to look to water-based and

land-based activities that will complement each other and ensure future vitality. New development should not block off the attractive views of the town. Why not experiment with temporary uses – festivals, markets, exhibitions, for example – and see what works and what does not?

The retail component of the town centre remains stronger than in some other small towns. This may be one of the benefits of being an island – driving to another town to shop is not an option here. People have long been accustomed to buying through catalogues, so the impact of e-commerce on local retailing may again be less than in mainland towns. The local Tesco is also not far from the main centre, but it and the other main supermarket have contributed to the closure of small local shops such as bakeries. Locally owned independent shops are an important part of the tourist offer provided they can deliver on quality.

If the future is more based on leisure and tourism, then there may be – and may need to be – more investment in hotel accommodation. Seasonality is a big problem in the yachting and cruise-boat sectors of tourism, but quality hotels and high profile winter events could help to spread the period when Stornoway could appeal to visitors, and also attract more people from the island into the town for evening activities. Residential uses also help to sustain the shops and other activities in the town centre.

One concern is that there is no town centre manager, and the local traders have not been able to come together as a body working for the future. Some links have been made to the Youth Parliament, but overall the tasks of visioning and delivering a viable town centre have depended greatly on the council's work on economic development and regeneration.

Education, labour markets and skills

Stornoway has no areas in the worst 15% in Scotland on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. The oil industry helps sustain incomes in local households, but pulls local people away from the island for work. The public sector is important in the number of jobs and the professional careers that it offers, e.g. through the Health Board. The BBC also provides important local jobs and a media visibility for the town. Incomes from such jobs, together with relatively affordable prices for family houses, help sustain local shops and other services. A further benefit is the range and quality of public services that the town has in comparison to mainland towns of a similar size. The local secondary school is well respected in the community and located close to the town centre. There are strong traditions in education here.

Well qualified and ambitious young people have left the island to enter higher education. The advent of the University of the Highlands and Islands has opened up opportunities for local higher education, and also attracted students from beyond Lewis. However, the local labour market for graduates remains relatively small compared to towns on the mainland.

Outside of school there is a strong traditional and contemporary music scene. There are pipe bands and an annual Celtic Festival, but also innovative moves into using the internet as a means of sharing creative and cultural output. There are also a range of sports available and young people are demonstrating high levels of achievement. The Princes Youth Trust has also made a significant contribution to opportunities for young people, linking into small business development.



Youth unemployment, so high across much of Europe at present, is less of a problem here. The merchant navy has traditionally been an important source of employment, along with the oil industry, and local services. However, there are concerns about employment and careers for the 30+ age group. There is also a large waiting list for social housing in Stornoway. Furthermore, the public sector, which has been so important in sustaining the local economy and quality of life, is now under great financial pressure. Services are being cut and further cuts are anticipated. The downside of the strong public sector has been a relatively small level of private sector employment, and weaknesses in terms of entrepreneurship in the town.

Renewable energy offers exciting possibilities for sustainable economic growth. However, the extent to which this is realised will depend on grid connections that enable locally produced energy to be exported to the large mainland markets.

Where now?

Stornoway is an important town in its own right, for the island of Lewis, other Hebridean islands and as part of Scotland's identity. It has a strong base in local traditions and culture, which is reflected in a built environment that is fundamental to the town's economic well-being. However, even being on an island is no longer enough to insulate a town from today's forces of economic and cultural change. Stornoway has always been defined by its relations to the sea, the historical link to the mainland and the wider world. That relation is changing as fishing declines as a source of jobs, the two ferries become one, opportunities for marine related leisure activities grow, and the Minch stands as the barrier to a renewable energy route to prosperity.

Thus the town now faces challenges in terms of identity, marketing, town planning and design that are probably greater than at any point in living memory. In a place where tradition has been a strong and valuable reference point, the need now is for a creative and innovative approach to place management. A broad and probably formal partnership is going to be needed bringing together the Council, the Port Authority, the Development Trust, local traders, the University, the secondary school and civil society and cultural organisations. As Lord Leverhulme found 90 years ago this is not a place on which an outsider can impose a vision. But that does make it all the more important for the people of Stornoway to develop and share their own vision of their town, and then back the actions needed to deliver it.