Small Towns in a Small Country

Findings from the Small Towns Initiative of the Built Environment Forum Scotland

Cliff Hague

September 2013
Executive Summary

The Built Environment Forum Scotland has developed and tested a small towns health check. Stakeholders in six small towns have used the health check to share ideas and focus discussions. A report for each of the six towns has been posted on the [www.befs.org.uk](http://www.befs.org.uk) website.

The main findings are:

- The historic environment is a vital part of small towns’ character, but is under threat.
- Conservation projects focused on the historic environment are playing an important part in small town regeneration.
- The town centres are struggling – innovative uses are needed.
- Property ownership and rateable values are part of the problem in town centres.
- Small towns are important to Scotland’s economy – there is local innovation and global connections.
- Public services are key providers of professional job opportunities, especially for women, and are important for community sustainability.
- Education opportunities are crucial to attracting families and retaining young people.
- Community / cultural activities and a safe, attractive environment can be an important part of a development strategy.
- Scotland’s small towns need better branding and visibility on the internet.
- Joined up action by the public sector needs to be supported by local residents and businesses.

Key recommendations are:

- More research is needed on the economic significance of Scotland’s small towns to underpin a small towns policy sitting alongside urban policy and rural policy.
- The Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme and the Town Centre Regeneration programme have helped to provide investment to conserve and enhance the centres of small towns. Such investment will continue to be needed, but the CARS programme should include powers for compulsory purchase.
- Means should be explored to enable temporary use by not-for-profit organisations of commercial premises that have been vacant for 6 months.
- Small towns need an integrated, place-based approach. Community planning partnerships can be a vehicle for this if they are focused on place rather than services.
- Schools have a key part to play in sustaining small towns. They are important in attracting and retaining families, sources of employment and spending and part of a town’s identity. Their full potential for developing entrepreneurship, building links with local businesses and involving young people in the future of their town should be explored and exploited.
- Use innovative local firms to spread innovation locally and through sub-regional networks and clusters.
- Work together, learn from each other.
- Develop the BEFS small town health check to promote interest and build partnerships in towns across Scotland.
A Nation of Small Towns

Scotland is a small country with many small towns. Thus small towns are especially important here for at least three reasons. Firstly, they are where many Scots live or earn a living: they are places that contribute significantly to Scotland’s economy and to national well-being. Secondly, they are of cultural importance: their buildings, streets and parks tell Scotland’s story, both to visitors but also to ourselves; they help define national, regional and local identity. Thirdly, they constitute a stock of property and environmental assets that needs to be nurtured for the future.

Yet Scotland’s small towns are enduring a prolonged crisis that in some cases could threaten their very existence. A combination of the economic crisis that began in the financial sector in 2008, and changing shopping patterns has highlighted the problems, and prompted a national review of Scotland’s town centres (National Review of Town Centres External Advisory Group Report, 2013).

However, the issues are wider than retailing: for example, many of our towns have at their heart iconic public buildings that are either empty or struggling to establish viable new uses. Former churches, town halls and sheriff courts are examples. Furthermore, while town centres are vitally important, so are other parts of a town and other activities. The quality of schools, houses, parks, business premises, and transport connections are obvious examples. Disinvestment – whether by the private or the public sector – puts the quality of our towns at risk, and if the towns are at risk, then so is the health of the country as a whole. Conservation of Scotland’s small towns means putting into practice the aspiration for sustainable economic growth.

A cause for concern?

The National Review of Town Centres distinguishes between “bustling cities“ and “smaller centres around them“ which together make up “networks of urban places“. This echoes findings in research internationally (e.g. World Bank, 2009) that has pointed to the growing competitive advantages offered by larger cities, but also the networked nature of settlements today. Within Europe, analysis of data for the period 1995-2004 at NUTS3 level (Dijkstra and Poelman, 2008) revealed that “cities with over 50,000 people are more likely to offer diverse employment opportunities, higher education, specialised health care, a sizeable local market, shops and services such as banking. All of these aspects influence the region’s capacity to attract and retain people and also its labour productivity“ (p.3).

This distinction between accessible and more remote smaller towns has been used by the Scottish Rural College (Skerratt et.al, 2012) to analyse data for places in Scotland. A “Vulnerability Index” was developed. It revealed that, in general, Scotland’s remote small towns and other urban areas (with a population of 10,000 to 125,000) are more vulnerable than its rural areas. In contrast, accessible rural areas were found to be the least vulnerable. This work exposed a cluster of vulnerable place in the south, and particularly the south west, of Scotland.
The Scottish Small Towns Task Group (2007) had already reported on the state of our small towns. The Group undertook a local authority survey of small towns with a population of between 2,000 and 20,000. Returns were received from 20 local authorities covering 33 towns with a combined population of 297,038. The report identified four types of small town:

1. Towns within 30 miles of cities with good transport links and a relatively large commuter population.
2. Declining traditional industrial towns which are on the edge of cities or relatively remote from city influences.
3. Towns relatively beyond the influence of cities and other major towns and performing the main market towns/service centre roles for their surrounding areas.
4. Seaports and service centres that are located on islands.

The Task Group made a strong case for the importance of small towns. It highlighted many concerns, notably in respect of young people, the deteriorating physical condition of many town centres and the importance of voluntary and community groups. The Group put forward numerous recommendations, including a call for a fund specifically dedicated to small town regeneration. The report was updated (Vestri and Colwell, 2009), again making the point that towns have not featured in Scottish Government policy in any systematic way.

More recently, The Carnegie UK Trust in partnership with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies has announced UK-wide research on towns. This will aim to collect data on people, businesses and places with a focus on the interdependency of places. Carnegie also has a TestTown initiative. This competition saw eleven teams of young entrepreneurs taking part in a weekend-long challenge in Dunfermline, in June 2013, testing out their ideas for innovations in town centres.

Outside of Scotland, there is also a focus on the challenges facing small towns. The Centre for Regeneration Excellence Wales has set up the “Small Towns: Policy and Delivery Network”, in response to the problems of town centres and retailing. In England, Action for Market Towns campaigns for small towns. The organisation has also fostered exchange visits between towns and has built up a collection of good practice case studies, many of which involve the reuse of empty buildings.

The past decade has also been marked by bottom-up initiatives in towns that seek to develop in less conventional ways. The Transition Towns Movement is a good example. It is a grassroots attempt to build resilience in the face of climate change and to life after peak oil. The emphasis is on self-sufficiency, with projects like local food networks, local energy supply, local transport and even local currency to retain money within a local economy. Similarly, “Cittaslow” or Slow Cities has accredited 147 towns in 24 countries which are working bottom-up to make “the world a healthier, greener, happier, slower place to inhabit” (Cittaslow, 2013).

“Many small towns have a long history and important heritage and cultural assets which makes them important to tourism in Scotland.” Scottish Small Towns Task Group (2007), p.15.
In summary, in and beyond Scotland questions are being posed about the future of small towns, although national level policies appear to pay little attention to their fate. However, the challenges that small towns face have prompted innovative actions, often from within the towns themselves.

The concept of a place-based approach to development has gained strength over the past decade. The OECD (2006) advocated a “New Rural Development Paradigm”. This aimed to change policy makers’ mind-sets away from a sectoral (usually agriculture -centric) approach based on subsidy and towards place-based, integrated actions across a number of sectors that focus on investment. In this approach competitive advantages are to be found in local specificities, such as local products or environmental qualities. Governance is seen as a critical factor, in particular decentralisation of powers and the building of partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

The Barca Report (2009) that reviewed EU regional policy pressed the case for place-based integrated development. As a result, the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 include provision to use the funds for sub-regional Community Led Local Development. Similarly, the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion has launched a research study that “seeks to investigate the added value that Small and Medium-Sized Towns can bring to both their local and regional territorial context and to the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” (Servillo et.al. 2012). Previously there has been little research on small towns across Europe.

“Something is stirring. People around the world are deciding that the well-being of their local community and its economy lies with them. They’re people like you. They’ve had enough, and, rather than waiting for permission, they’re rolling up their sleeves, getting together with friends and neighbours, and doing something about it.” Rob Hopkins, 2013, The Power of Just Doing Stuff.
The BEFS Small Towns Initiative

BEFS and its member organisations, with their commitment to Scotland’s historic built environment, have been increasingly concerned about our small towns. BEFS is also aware of the ideas and initiatives described above. Thus in 2012, BEFS launched its Small Towns Initiative, seeking to build on but not duplicate such work. The definition of a “small town” is necessarily arbitrary: the Scottish Government’s Urban-Rural Classification says they have a population of between 3,000 and 10,000. However, in the present context in Scotland these boundaries seem too restrictive if we are to better engage with the changes places are going through.

The BEFS Initiative has had four elements. First, the 2012 BEFS Congress took Small Towns as its central theme, bringing together a range of professional and civic society speakers to share evidence and ideas. Second, a “health check” was devised and used as the basis for visits to six small towns between November 2012 and May 2013. Third, a full report was written and posted on www.befs.org.uk for each of these visits. Then, a part of that website was developed into a portal for work about small towns. These four mutually supporting actions, supplemented by this report, create an evidence base for the development of Scotland’s small towns.

Central to BEFS approach is the idea that a small town is more than just its town centre, important as the centre is. The health check was designed in the spirit of Geddes’ “Folk, Work, Place”. Thus it addressed the built environment, but also competitiveness and innovation; sustainable development, and also the social life of the town. The full check list is Appendix 1 of this report.

The idea behind the health check is that it can be easily used, both by professionals and non-professionals. It recognises that different people from different perspectives might well have different views about their town. The check list is not an end in itself and there was never any intention to produce some kind of league table of town “scores”. Tables like that seem to be of little value, not least because they are liable to create local resentment and a negative image for “poor performers”. Instead it is better to bring local stakeholders together and so that they explore common concerns and the scope for local action. The check list was devised with this end in mind: it is a way to start local discussion, not an externally imposed means of ranking places in some kind of league table.

The check list has been used to listen to the views of people, elected members and officials from the towns and independently produce diagnostic reports. The discussions were structured around the questions in the check list. They usually lasted about 2 hours and involved about a dozen people each time. Notes of these discussions were supplemented by a walk-about in each town centre and by also visiting other parts of each town, e.g. education campuses, out-of-centre retail areas, suburban housing etc. In addition information about the town in publications and on the internet was collected and used in the reports.
Figure 1: The six towns and their characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arbroath</td>
<td>22,785</td>
<td>Coastal town on the east coast accessible to larger centre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbeltown</td>
<td>5,144</td>
<td>Coastal town on the west coast remote from larger centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumfries</td>
<td>31,146</td>
<td>Regional capital for rural south-west Scotland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elgin</td>
<td>20,829</td>
<td>Sub-regional centre in the north, within rural region but accessible to larger centre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilsyth</td>
<td>9,816</td>
<td>Accessible town in the Central Belt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stornoway</td>
<td>5,660 (estimated 2011)</td>
<td>Coastal town and regional centre on an island in the north-west.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six towns were chosen in the light of the findings discussed above about small towns in general and in Scotland in particular. The aim was to include both accessible and remote towns; regional “capitals” and towns without such functions; and inland, coastal and island towns. Also there had to be a willingness from some local body (usually the Council) to facilitate the visit. Thus the approach was rather pragmatic and the selection cannot be seen as statistically rigorous. However, as Figure 1 shows, together the six towns show some cross-section of Scotland’s small towns, both functionally and geographically. For example, coasts and islands are an important part of Scotland’s territory and identity, and small towns are an integral part of island life, while much the same could be said of the (post-) industrial Central Belt.

Findings

A common theme across all the towns was the impact of externally generated change. Sometimes this comes from the market, with traditional industries closing or relocating. However, change also comes from public policy decisions that address priorities other than the health of a small Scottish town. Rationalisations of the defence estate are an example, as is the EU’s fisheries policy. Changes in local government structures and reforms of service delivery also tend to impact adversely on small towns. The challenge is to find paths to local development that build resilience in the face of such challenges.

Each town has its own unique set of circumstances, challenges and opportunities. These are discussed in the separate reports on each of the six towns, which can be seen at www.befs.org.uk. However, ten key findings are set out in Figure 2 then discussed.
Figure 2: Key findings

- The historic environment is a vital part of small towns' character, but is under threat.
- Conservation projects focused on the historic environment are playing an important part in small town regeneration.
- The town centres are struggling – innovative uses are needed.
- Property ownership and rateable values are part of the problem in town centres.
- Small towns are important to Scotland’s economy – there is local innovation and global connections.
- Public services are key providers of professional job opportunities, especially for women, and are important for community sustainability.
- Education opportunities are crucial to attracting families and retaining young people.
- Community / cultural activities and a safe, attractive environment can be an important part of a development strategy.
- Scotland’s small towns need better branding and visibility on the internet.
- Joined up action by the public sector needs to be supported by local residents and businesses.

1. The historic environment is a vital part of small towns’ character, but it is under threat.

Each of the towns has its own character and qualities, developed out of current and past functions. The buildings, infrastructure and public spaces are integral to the sense of place. They are valued by residents and can attract tourists. Some buildings are integral to Scotland’s story, e.g. Arbroath Abbey, adding greatly to the town’s tourism offer, but also then needing a vibrant town as a setting to sustain their appeal.

The historic environment remains a significant part of all six towns, their local identity and Scotland’s identity. The harbours, their histories and current uses are integral to the three coastal towns. Elgin’s elegant architecture and street pattern in its historic core imparts a sense of place and of Scottish identity. The Mid Steeple Tower (dating from 1708) sits at the heart of Dumfries, where the vista from the High Street is to Robert Burns’ statue and the Greyfriars Kirk. Kilsyth, close to the Antonine Wall World Heritage Site has the delightful Colzium House estate and the Forth and Clyde canal, but also is an example of a town built and cared for by the municipal socialism that is part of lowland Scotland’s twentieth century cultural and political heritage.

Why is the integrity of these valued historic environments under threat? Put simply, the answer is economic and social change, though the details vary from place to place. Industrial closures and the use of...

“The long recession has hit the housing market, and there is growing concern about the condition of tenement properties in the heart of the town. Flats here can be picked up for less than £25,000, clear evidence of low demand. … problems of disinvestment from repair and maintenance must be a worry. Efforts are being made to alert property owners and residents to these issues.” BEFS Report on Campbeltown.
large sites for supermarkets and parking have breached the intimacy of Arbroath’s historic street pattern. Fisheries policies and the economics of ferry operations have impacts on harbours.

But rationalisations of the public estate also have their impacts. In Campbeltown whisky, shipbuilding, fishing, forestry and tourism have all experienced restructuring, but the South Kintyre Development Trust is trying to conserve the fabric of the former town hall building and to find viable future uses for it, a similar challenge that is being addressed in Stornoway. In Elgin, St. Giles church is a splendid centrepiece for the town, but new sources of revenue are likely to be needed to sustain it. Friars Vennel, a medieval street in Dumfries is the subject of a controversial development proposal, while Moat Brae, a B-listed Georgian town house where J.M.Barrie played as a child lay semi-derelict for a long time.

2. **Conservation projects focused on the historic environment are playing an important part in small town regeneration.**

Funding through the Historic Scotland Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme, the Townscape Heritage Initiative of the Heritage Lottery Fund, and the Town Centre Regeneration Fund is having visible and beneficial effects. These investments are appreciated by local stakeholders and have helped to address some of the challenges sketched above: for example, Moat Brae is now being restored. The former town hall has been the prime focus of the Townscape Heritage Initiative in Stornoway, though the full potential for a mixed use property providing facilities attracting residents and tourists is still some way short of being realised. Investment in heritage conservation in the town has helped to build business confidence that is reflected in the opening of a number of specialist and high value shops and cafes, which in turn enhance Stornoway’s attractiveness and local economy. In Elgin a Business Improvement District is a catalyst for local action.

However, there are some concerns. In Kilsyth, gap sites on the main street highlight the inability of the Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme to fund compulsory purchase of land and property. In Arbroath, the regeneration of the harbour and the importance of the Abbey have not been enough to sustain the quality of the town centre that lies between them.

3. **The town centres are struggling – innovative uses are needed.**

Reference has already been made to the plight of town centres in small towns. In all six towns there are vacant retail units in the centre. Stornoway appeared to be less adversely affected than the others. This is partly because its island location means that competition is more limited than on the mainland. In addition, because of its remoteness, households traditionally have used catalogues to make purchases, and so the advent of on-line shopping has probably been less than in some of the other towns. However, Campbeltown is also remote, but a 2010 study found 20 vacancies out of the 135 units in the town centre.
The state of the local economy in general, and the local labour market in particular, is clearly an influence. However, so too is competition from out-of-town and edge-town supermarkets. Although there is evidence that the peak of such developments may have passed (The Observer, 2013), their negative impact on the centres of small towns is beyond question. There was even a suggestion that in Kilsyth, travel to a supermarket in another town was creating new social divisions within the community.

As well as active conservation and regeneration measures such as those discussed above, innovations are required to begin to turn around declining town centres. Elgin has been able to retain many independent retailers, including some serving the higher value end of the market. It shows that local distinctiveness can create business. There is also a role for non-traditional types of business – in both Kilsyth and Arbroath voluntary and social enterprises are operating attractive cafes. A Latin American-style band playing on Dumfries High Street brightened a dark November day. Town centres are meeting places. There is potential in the empty shops to create informal places for younger people to meet up. Too often there is nothing to do in the small towns after 5pm.

4. **Property ownership and rateable values are part of the problem in town centres.**

Although the evidence was anecdotal, property ownership appears to make a difference when it comes to filling vacant properties. In more than one town, the view of the stakeholders is that when property is owned by a person or company that is based locally, then there is a chance that a realistic view is taken of the rental income that it can generate. In contrast, when a property is part of a portfolio operated from far away, the risk is that it is left empty in expectation that somebody will eventually pay what was seen as the market rate. Such vacancies are likely to further depress the town and the local commercial property market.

Similarly, there are widespread concerns amongst traders about rateable values in Scotland’s small towns. There is again a perception that these have not caught up with the real situation in many places.

5. **Small towns are important to Scotland’s economy – there is local innovation and global connections.**

Despite the gloomy prognosis about town centres, the health checks revealed significant economic strengths in small towns. While innovation is most often associated with agglomeration economies, in practice there is evidence of innovation in all the towns visited. However, it is often hidden away on industrial estates, and not really connected to attempts to develop an innovative outlook across the town as a whole.

MacIntyre Chocolate Systems in Arbroath produce a wide range of machinery for the confectionery, biscuit and ice cream industries throughout the world. In Kilsyth, Stewart-Buchanan Gauges Ltd
makes products which serve the oil and gas industry amongst others, and which are sold world-wide. At Campbeltown the Machrihanish Airbase Community Company successfully undertook a pioneering community buy-out of the former air base and has ideas to create a duty-free facility within it. Dumfries has seen the development of the Crichton Campus to bring a research park facility into the town, while Stornoway is developing with a view to increasing its trade through attracting yachts. For the longer term Stornoway Port Authority is responding to opportunities for an Arctic sea route to China by considering building a special port for Arctic ships so they could refuel and discharge cargoes into smaller vessels for onward shipment to markets in north-west Europe.

These and similar initiatives show that the small towns already play an important role in Scotland’s economy. There is potential to scale up this level of innovation if local networks can be strengthened and clusters developed.

6. Public services are key providers of professional job opportunities, especially for women, and are important to community sustainability.

One of the indicators used in the Vulnerability Index was the percentage of local jobs that are in the public sector. In view of the continuing pressure of public service employment this is understandable. However, the converse is also true: public sector jobs are an important part of the local economy in many small towns. In the regional and sub-regional capitals in particular they help sustain other local jobs and services through the multiplier effect. Of the towns visited for the health checks, Dumfries and Stornoway particularly benefit as they are the regional centres for local government and for health services. The BBC also provides important local jobs in Stornoway, which enjoys a range and quality of public services not normally found in similar mainland settlements of the same size.

Twice as many women than men work in the public sector in Scotland (WISE, 2013). While much public sector female employment is poorly paid, health and education are particularly important sectors in which women occupy significant proportions of professional-level jobs. Health boards, hospitals, schools and colleges therefore play a particularly important role in making small towns attractive places for professional women and two-earner households to live.

Apart from the jobs they provide, public services are vitally important in sustaining small town communities. Indeed universal public service provision has meant that small towns could compete with larger urban centres in terms of the quality of life they can offer. In the present financial climate this can no longer be taken for granted. There are currently two NHS dental surgeries operating in Campbeltown: the next nearest is an hour away at Lochgilphead.

“Before 1996, the former Hawick Town Hall was used as the headquarters of the District Council. Following centralisation of several services the upper floors were mainly vacant. These have been refurbished and are now fully occupied. Contact Centre on the ground floor acts as reception for Social Work and Environment & Infrastructure staff. The refurbishment has given renewed life to a landmark building. Over 100 staff work there adding footfall to the High Street.” Scottish Futures Trust, 2011, p.27.
The Scottish Futures Trust is seeking to improve asset management and estate planning across what it calls “the local civil estate”. This may lead to disposal and reuse of some buildings no longer required for public use. Again small towns, because of their scale and the significant presence of the public sector, are likely to be particularly sensitive to such changes. As well as achieving efficiency savings the exercise also needs to optimise small town regeneration.

7. **Education opportunities are crucial to attracting families and retaining young people.**

Schools are important in attracting families with children to a town. Schools are also important institutions in a small town. They help build a sense of identity and community, they help to create a skilled local labour force, and can nurture awareness of local culture, history and place. They are also important in a local economy as a source of jobs but also by concentrating potential consumers for local traders. More specifically, large secondary schools that are close to the centre of a town are likely to help retain the viability of shops and provide vitality to the centre. Conversely suburban development or relocation of schools is likely to impact adversely, and also to increase the proportion of students being driven to school rather than travelling by more environmentally friendly modes of transport. In short, schools should be a significant part of a town development strategy, connected to local businesses and to community organisations.

One common problem in small towns has been the leakage away from the town of the most talented youngsters in search of higher education. There are promising signs that the University of the Highlands and Islands, with its multiple campuses and opportunities for on-line learning, is having an impact. In Stornoway the University is attracting students from beyond Lewis, reversing the traditional flow. The economic strategy in Elgin 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.

The development of the Crichton Campus has brought higher education to Dumfries. The campus 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 remains the risk that the structure of the local labour market will result in loss of skilled young people after graduation. There is also a downside to the strength of the public sector in many of the small towns. This is the relative weakness of an entrepreneurial culture. In Stornoway, The Princes Youth Trust has made a significant contribution to opportunities for young people, linking into small business development.

“Dumfries Learning Town’s Schools Innovation Initiative seeks to restructure 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.”

BEFS Report on Dumfries.
8. **Community / cultural activities and a safe, attractive environment can be an important part of a development strategy.**

The value of community and cultural activities is easy to underestimate. These can be an important part of the attractiveness of a small town to current and potential residents, and can also support tourism in some places. Community and cultural activities nourish local networks and build a sense of place: they are a fundamental part of “place-making”.

The lack of “things to do” is felt most keenly by teenagers in small towns everywhere. While Scotland’s small towns often have a range of formal organisations catering to young people, such as the Girl Guides or Boys Brigade, there is often a lack of cheap places for youths to socialise informally. In Kilsyth, for example, some young people congregate on the main street, using the seating as a place to “hang out”. Such groups can then create concern for some older residents. There is no cinema and no skate park, and the last bus back from Glasgow leaves at 11pm.

Campbeltown has a range of active community organisations that are important in the cultural life of the town. The Kintyre Cultural Forum has aspirations for a new Arts and Culture Centre. In the meantime they host various events. There is a successful Music Festival and also a Songwriters Festival each year. Campbeltown has award winning pipe bands and brass bands. Here as elsewhere, voluntary bodies play a vital role in supporting the historic built environment.

Another potential attraction of small towns is that they potentially provide a safer and less stressful place to live than the large city. This can be part of their appeal to young families and to older people. Design and management of streets and public spaces can influence this appeal positively – or negatively.

For example, part of the competitive advantage of a small town should be that it is pleasant to walk around, well-lit and safe for cyclists. In reality, too many of our small towns are not realising this potential. While Dumfries has “GoBikes” available for instant hire and some cycle routes, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Meanwhile in all the towns there are extensive areas given over to car parks, sometimes in prime locations. In Arbroath, for example, a large car park behind the main street isolates rather than connects the street to pedestrian flows. In Stornoway a key stretch of waterfront is given over to parking.

With the exception of Campbeltown, the towns visited have pedestrianised high streets. However, town centre retailers threatened by stores on the periphery with large free car parks cling to the hope that nearby parking can aid their business. This is understandable but also an over-simplification.

“Campbeltown’s Picture House celebrated its centenary in May 2013. It was one of Scotland’s earliest purpose-built cinemas, and is possibly the oldest that has been continuously running films. It is an ‘A-listed’ building. Its survival and current vibrancy – showing current release films - is due to the efforts of local volunteers who operate it as a community business.” BEFS Report on Campbeltown.
9. Scotland’s small towns need better branding and visibility on the internet.

A place-based approach to development requires a clear understanding of local strengths and distinctiveness. All the towns studied by BEFS have these. However, in no case are they the clear and dominant narrative about the town. Furthermore, Scotland’s large local government units mean that our small towns lack the political and promotional profile that equivalent towns in have in Scandinavia, for example. They do not collect their own revenue, there is no mayor, no town council, no town hall, and promotion of the town is through pages within local authority or Visit Scotland websites. In Campbeltown a group of local businesses have teamed up to create www.campbeltown.org because they felt they needed a stronger and more direct vehicle to promote their town.

Against that, the extensive scale of the local authorities enables them to act more strategically for the development and promotion of a network of small towns in their area, and to make efficient use of professional skills. For example, Argyll and Bute have the CHORD regeneration programme (Campbeltown, Helensburgh, Oban, Rothesay and Dunoon), while Moray Council has the Moray Towns Partnership. North Lanarkshire is developing frameworks for the centres of seven of its towns, including Kilsyth.

In more decentralised countries small towns are more likely to have their own website. They address local residents, visitors and potential business investors. To give just a couple of examples, www.ci.mcminnville.or.us is the site of the town of McMinnville, a town in Oregon of about 33,000. It has separate sections for city services, residents, business and visitors, and includes a section on sustainability and an up-to-date promotional statement from the mayor. The Notodden Kommune in Norway has 12,000 residents and its own website www.notodden.kommune.no, which is used amongst other things to promote the town’s annual international blues festival.

Elgin City of the Future, is an initiative that is looking to coordinate a number of substantial capital development projects for Elgin over the next 10 years. It brings stakeholders together around five inter-related “Platforms”:

- Elgin High Street – “the most important economic space in the region”;
- Innovation in technology and business – particularly under-performance in retailing;
- Education and Health – 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 – economic potential and community engagement

10. Joined up action by the public sector needs to be supported by local residents and businesses.

Given the challenges that small towns face, local stakeholders need to work together. However, this is not so easy to achieve. For example in Stornoway 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. Similarly, in Arbroath there is little cohesion amongst High Street traders: a “Hope for the High Street” event planned by the Arbroath and Area Partnership in October 2012 was cancelled due to lack of interest.
The Community Planning system is the most obvious vehicle to focus and deliver “joined up” action, but with so much pressure on council budgets there is a risk that cut-backs on services will have unintended knock-on effects. For example, Kilsyth has Walkers are Welcome status and seeks to attracting walkers to spend more time and money in the town. However, it has closed the town’s public toilets – a facility that long distance walkers appreciate.

All the towns have local civic society organisations and youth groups, but it is rare for these to be centrally engaged in designing and delivering a vision for the town. Similarly, there are empty premises that could be used to showcase the work of a local history society or school children.. Imaginative work is being done. For example, in Campbeltown the Schoolhouse project, accessed money from Europe as well as Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme and the Townscape Heritage Initiative, and involved the Kintyre Amenities Trust and the Strathclyde Buildings Preservation Trust. It opened in 2012 as a “bunkhouse” managed by Kintyre Amenity Trust. In the context of moves by the Scottish Government towards “community empowerment” such experiences need to be shared and local skills and capacity need to be developed across the small towns.
Recommendations

To the Scottish Government

- More research is needed on the economic significance of Scotland’s small towns to underpin a small towns policy sitting alongside urban policy and rural policy.
- The Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme and the Town Centre Regeneration programme have helped to provide investment to conserve and enhance the centres of small towns. Such investment will continue to be needed, but the CARS programme should include powers for compulsory purchase.
- Rateable values of business properties in town centres should reflect present market realities.
- Means should be explored to enable temporary use by not-for-profit organisations of commercial premises that have been vacant for 6 months.
- Reuse of public buildings as part of a conservation and regeneration strategy should be a high priority for the Scottish Futures Trust in their endeavours to rationalise the local public estate.
- The case for removing VAT from building repairs should be vigorously advocated to the UK government.

To local government and enterprise agencies

- Small towns need an integrated, place-based approach. Community planning partnerships can be a vehicle for this if they are focused on place rather than services.
- Schools have a key part to play in sustaining small towns. They are important in attracting and retaining families, sources of employment and spending and part of a town’s identity. Their full potential for developing entrepreneurship, building links with local businesses and involving young people in the future of their town should be explored and exploited.
- Use innovative local firms to spread innovation locally and through sub-regional networks and clusters.
- Look for ways to enhance the small town environment for pedestrians and cyclists, even if it means reclaiming areas in the centre currently dedicated to car parking.
- Maintenance of public spaces is critically important to the quality of life that a small town can offer.
- Use and adapt the BEFS small town health check to foster dialogues and generate ideas.

To small town communities

- Work together, learn from each other.
- Be active and vigilant in the promotion and use of your town.
- Use and adapt the BEFS small town health check to promote interest and build partnerships in your town.
References


Appendix 1: The health check used in BEFS small town visits

Score from 1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = average; 4 = good; 5 = excellent

**Built environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the historic built environment an asset?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there active conservation of historic environment assets, or buildings at risk?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have recent developments enhanced the identity and appeal of the town?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the main public space in the town?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Competitiveness and innovation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How strong is demand for property – residential, commercial, industrial?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there examples locally of innovation in business or administration?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there employment opportunities within 30 minutes travel for skilled workers?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitality of the town centre, and presence of independent retailers?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Social life and cohesion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there a secondary school that is popular and at the heart of the town, socially and physical?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything open after 6pm, especially for young people?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are residents and businesses engaged in making their town a good place to live? How active is the community council? Is there a development trust? How far away are the council offices? Are there channels for voices of young people to be heard?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are local services of general interest – shops, schools, hospitals, post offices etc. being kept or lost or improved?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sustainable development and environmental resilience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the town pedestrian and cyclist friendly with good accessibility for all?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it well served by public transport so that people are not car-dependent?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there local initiatives to reduce carbon emissions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are areas of the town built on a flood plain?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall diagnosis