



# Beyond Boundaries: 'Lifeline' Towns and Rural Exclusion

Summary of the workshop discussion, written by Jenny Brotchie and Jane Atterton

# 1. Introduction

---

In remote rural areas small towns may perform a critical 'lifeline' function for people on low incomes or without access to personal transport. Research has highlighted, however, that many of these small towns face particular vulnerabilities<sup>1</sup>. The Carnegie UK Trust and SRUC are exploring whether there is a need to think beyond the boundaries of the town centre to the role that towns play in relation to their rural hinterlands when considering the future of small towns, and, if so, how this can most effectively be done.

This paper summarises themes raised at a half day workshop at the Crichton University Campus in Dumfries on Monday 9th December 2013. The workshop



**Jenny Brotchie**

was jointly organised by Jenny Brotchie, Policy Officer, Carnegie UK Trust and Jane Atterton, Manager and Policy Researcher, Rural Policy Centre, SRUC with support from the Crichton Institute. The workshop brought together key national and regional stakeholders. It featured presentations by three 'keynote speakers': Jim Metcalfe (Head of Practice, Carnegie UK Trust), Chris Wade (Chief Executive, AMT Towns Alive) and Jane Atterton (Manager and Policy Researcher, Rural Policy Centre, SRUC) and a welcome from Dame Barbara Kelly. The presentations, along with the agenda for the day, are available on the Carnegie UK Trust [website](#). Discussions were conducted under Chatham House Rules.



**Jane Atterton**

While discussions at the workshop drew on the specific challenges in South West Scotland - where small towns face particular vulnerabilities –the issues discussed were of national (Scotland and UK) level relevance.



**Jim Metcalfe**

The discussions summarised here will inform Carnegie UK Trust and SRUC thinking and future research on

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see SRUC's Rural Scotland in Focus 2012 report here: [http://www.sruc.ac.uk/info/120428/rural\\_scotland\\_in\\_focus](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/info/120428/rural_scotland_in_focus).



**Chris Wade**



**Dame Barbara Kelly**

the role of small towns. Our aim is to develop some practical recommendations for policymakers, including the Scottish Government, as the **Town Centre Action Plan** is implemented in 2014.

Four key themes emerged at the workshop:

- The changing functions of small towns
- The importance of networked development
- The need for a holistic approach
- The need for a better understanding of the relationship between towns and their hinterlands

*Note: These notes are intended as an aide memoire to capture individual points raised at the workshop. They should not be read as reflecting the views of the workshop as a whole or any consensus among the attendees. A list of attendees is provided at the end of the document.*



## 2. The changing context for small towns

Small towns have traditionally provided a range of services and functions for inhabitants of the local area, ranging from education and health provision to employment, entertainment and retail. Our lifestyles and needs are however changing. In the digital age a physical journey to the nearest town centre may be no longer necessary. Participants at the workshop suggested that many local residents may now be bypassing their nearest small town altogether in favour of a nearby city or specialist services in other local towns. An ageing population is bringing additional changes in local service demand and travel patterns.

These changes present new opportunities to reinvent small town centres for the 21st century. But there is also a risk of a growing gap between highly connected, relatively affluent, online and mobile residents and digitally excluded, less

affluent residents with restricted mobility who remain reliant on services in the nearest small towns - for which there is dwindling demand, and for which public sector funding is likely to be reduced.

A number of participants suggested that there may be a tension between the 'gentrification' of rural towns and service provision for those at risk of social exclusion in rural areas. The risk is that a two speed landscape develops. In this landscape some small towns thrive, servicing mobile and affluent residents and the tourist market. Others - providing more traditional 'lifeline' services to less affluent and mobile local residents - risk a vicious cycle of increasing economic and social challenges as the local economy struggles and demand for public services grows.



### 3. The importance of networked development

There was broad agreement in our discussions that critical to the future success of small towns and their rural hinterlands will be positive local assets such as enterprise, innovation, creativity, adaptability, capacity and self-reliance. As outlined in the Carnegie UK Trust report [Future Directions in Rural Development](#) there is evidence to suggest that 'networked local development' is most effective in delivering local progress. Networked local development is community led development that makes the most of local assets whilst also engaging with wider regional, national and international processes, resources and frameworks. For this reason some participants were concerned about introducing any new typologies or categorisations such as 'lifeline' town from the 'top down' as this may stifle bottom up processes. Instead empowered communities should be enabled to define their own local towns. A number of existing frameworks that could be adapted/ combined to help communities do this were highlighted at the workshop including AMT Towns Alive's [Town Centre Benchmarking System](#) and the Built Environment Forum's Small Towns [Health Check](#).

Slow economic growth and public sector budgetary pressures provide a challenging context for 'networked development' as some top down resources are withdrawn. While new opportunities may open up for those communities with the capacity to take advantage of them, not all communities are equally able. Some towns will be in a better position to take advantage

of opportunities than others. Capacity building support will be required to ensure that a 'two-speed' economy does not develop. The challenge here will be ensuring that those communities that will benefit most from any capacity building support are able to access it. This may involve differential investment in communities.

Many participants felt that ensuring that local people have the means to input into decision-making was key to successful local development. This requires local democratic structures, the quality and representativeness of which is currently the focus of much attention in Scotland (for example, through the proposed [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Bill consultation](#)). There is likely to be more opportunity to involve local people in the community planning process and in participatory democracy such as participatory local budgeting or planning Charrettes<sup>2</sup>. A number of participants felt that this would be particularly important when towns are pursuing radically different futures.



## 4. A holistic approach

There was broad agreement amongst participants that towns policies should be about more than retail and high street developments. There is an opportunity for joined up policy-making across Government at both the national and local level (for example in Scotland linking the [Town Centre Action Plan](#) and the [Community Empowerment Bill](#)) with Government providing enabling and flexible frameworks and (long-term) support for appropriate locally-driven actions.

Spatial planning has an important influence on the local economy and how local residents access services. The failure to encourage people to live in small town centres by utilising traditional buildings above shops meaning that town centres die at night and at weekends with a profound affect on the local economy, was raised as an example. Some participants felt that there is a particular opportunity to better join up spatial and sectoral planning so that the community planning process is better linked with 'physical' planning. This will help to bring about more creative thinking and encourage all actors, including the private sector, to become more involved.

A number of participants stressed the importance of engaging the private sector in local development processes, recognising that many businesses in small towns are small and micro

enterprises (including sole traders) which are often well embedded locally and are significant players in their local economies.

There was a general consensus amongst participants that towns have an important role to play economically, socially and environmentally. However, cities are powerful advocates of their role as the powerhouses of the economy and key sources of innovation. In the face of this, and the strong lobby arguing that there are specific characteristics, opportunities and needs facing rural Scotland, towns have been left as the 'the middle ground' with a relatively weak voice in terms of informing policy. There is an opportunity to take a more holistic approach that recognises the interdependency of cities, towns and rural areas and their roles in improving wellbeing.

Finally participants noted that there are many examples of town 'success stories' such as the Dumfries & Galloway 'theme towns'<sup>3</sup> or West Kilbride Craft Town. However often the lessons from these individual cases are not made readily available to inform others. There is a need to improve how best practice is shared.

<sup>3</sup> For example Wigtown Book Town, Castle Douglas Food Town and Kirkcudbright Artist's Town



## 5. A better understanding of the relationship between towns and their hinterlands

It appeared from these discussions that a better understanding of the dynamics between towns, their rural hinterlands and those at risk of rural exclusion is required. The importance of small towns in rural areas appears to be broadly acknowledged and accepted and it is often assumed that rural hinterland residents and businesses depend on their nearby towns for a range of services. However there is very little data available that validates this assumption. Indeed there may well be evidence to suggest that towns actually depend more heavily on their hinterlands. We need to improve our knowledge and understanding about how towns and their hinterlands – and towns and nearby urban centres – interact. What is the nature and scale of these flows and interactions? The answers to these questions will likely be very different for different towns.

In seeking to better understand these flows, it is important to take an integrated, territorial (rather than a narrow, sectoral) approach, and to recognise that administrative boundaries, such as local authority areas or even country borders, may create artificial barriers.

Participants felt that only with a full understanding of the roles and functions of towns and their interactions can we appropriately and accurately inform policy development. One way to do this may be to create a new set of typologies for small towns (although see above for concerns about top-down typologies). Typologies can be useful for grouping towns with similarities and differences. A typology based on town functions would be more useful for informing



appropriate policy responses than one simply based on population size and distance from a larger settlement. Scotland could draw on experience elsewhere to develop an appropriate typology for its towns. Participants acknowledged however that typologies can both help and hinder (see section 2), so any work on this would need to be done carefully and involve all key stakeholders.

Finally participants agreed that we need to know more about how current processes, such as concerns over climate change, public sector budget cuts, digital services, increases in the costs of living and transport, and demographic change are impacting on the traditional roles and functions of small towns.

## 6. Where next?

---

The following action points are suggested from the workshop:

- **Carnegie UK Trust and SRUC:** To circulate a summary of the key issues discussed at the meeting, including suggested action points.
- **Carnegie UK Trust:** To use the discussions at the workshop as the basis for a more detailed thought piece on the role of small towns in talking social exclusion.
- **Carnegie UK Trust:** To continue work on 'TestTown', focusing on skills improvement amongst 18-30 year olds, and share the lessons from this programme.
- **SRUC:** To produce an output (e.g. Rural Policy Centre Policy Briefing) which reviews recent and current strategies, funding streams, organisations, policies, research projects, etc. focusing on towns from across the UK; this can be used to inform a strong, clear narrative about the roles and importance of towns to regional economies.
- **SRUC:** Through its ongoing LEADER work, to explore the ways in which 'larger towns' ('where they have a coherent relationship with their rural hinterland') are incorporated into Local Development Strategies (LDSs) -as set out in the recent Scottish Government-issued LDS guidance<sup>4</sup>.
- **Scottish Government:** To continue to share best practice and lead innovation through the implementation of the Town Centre Action Plan.
- **Scottish Government:** Town Centre Action Plan team to share information on an ongoing basis with other policy colleagues, including those working on the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill.
- **Scotland's Towns Partnership, AMT & Carnegie UK Trust:** To further explore the development of a Scottish typology of towns and a holistic approach to benchmarking the social and economic value of town centres, in close discussion with Scottish Government.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/farmingrural/Rural/Leaderapproach2014-20/Leader2014-20/Leaderstage2/priorities>.

# Attendees

Chris Wade, Action for Market Towns (speaker)

Jim Metcalfe, Carnegie UK Trust (speaker)

Jane Atterton, SRUC/Crichton Institute (speaker)

Barbara Kelly, Crichton Foundation

Martyn Evans, Carnegie UK Trust (Chair)

Mike Bonaventura, Crichton Carbon Centre

Jenny Brotchie, Carnegie UK Trust

Eric Calderwood, University of Stirling

David Cowan, Scottish Government

Gill Dykes, On behalf of Alex Fergusson MSP

Sue Hudson, Sue Hudson Planning (on behalf of RTPI Scotland)

Bill Pagan, Built Environment Forum Scotland

Andrew Prendergast, Plunkett Foundation

Brian Macdonald, Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum

Elaine McGregor, Scottish Government

Andy Milne, Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum

Eva Milroy, Crichton Institute

Elaine Murray MSP, Scottish Parliament

Douglas Scott, Scottish Borders Council

Pip Tabor, Southern Uplands Partnership

Gareth Williams, SCDI





**This report was written by Jenny Brotchie and Jane Atterton and published in January 2014.**

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. Since its creation by Andrew Carnegie in 1913, the Trust has worked with many partners in the UK and Ireland to help build our modern society – prompting policy change, creating new organisations, and support innovative practice. The 21st century brings new technological, cultural, economic and social challenges but the underlying purpose of the Trust – to promote the wellbeing of the people of the UK and Ireland – continues to underpin all our work.

**Andrew Carnegie House**  
**Pittencrieff Street**  
**Dunfermline, KY12 8AW**  
**Tel: +44 (0)1383 721445**  
**Fax: +44 (0)1383 749799**  
**Email: [info@carnegieuk.org](mailto:info@carnegieuk.org)**  
**[www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk)**

Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) delivers world class research, education and consultancy to lead innovation and sustainable development in the agriculture and rural sector. SRUC was formed on 1st October 2012 as the result of a merger of SAC (Scottish Agricultural College) and Barony, Elmwood and Oatridge Colleges. SRUC's Rural Policy Centre operates as a focus for research in rural policy, informing and contributing to policy debates through conducting research projects, issuing regular briefings and reports, and organising high profile events. Our work covers the breadth of rural issues, including agriculture, food and drink, animal and plant health, climate change and community resilience.

Rural Policy Centre, SRUC  
Peter Wilson Building  
West Mains Road  
Edinburgh, EH9 3JG  
Tel: 0131 5354256  
Email: [jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk)  
[www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre)



Carnegie United Kingdom Trust  
Scottish charity SC 012799 operating in the UK and Ireland  
Incorporated by Royal Charter 1917