
Small towns of the future, not the past.

“National policy and practice should be corrected to reflect the very specific attributes, assets and challenges of our small towns. We are calling for a more strategic approach from all tiers of government and other decision makers.”

Essay No.1 July 2011

Small towns of the future,
not the past.



Edited by Alison Eardley
Copyright © Small Towns for Tomorrow 2011
www.smalltownsfortomorrow.org

Foreword

Lord Cameron of Dillington

At the start of this century our small country towns, familiar as hubs of enterprise and social cohesion for their surrounding countryside, were, after years of relative neglect in policy terms, the focus of attention of the Countryside Agency. As a result, individual local partnership-led regeneration programmes were devised by some towns, and were helped to fruition by the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and others. Although this work continues in many towns, it is largely uncoordinated, and opportunities to learn from it are now few.

And so, with the Countryside Agency now gone and the RDAs going, is it time once again to look at the potential of these diverse and special places? I believe the answer is yes.

Our towns have differing characteristics, and they offer a wide variety of routes to economic, environmental and social success. What is important is that each of them should be given the encouragement and the means to build on their strengths so they can develop to meet local needs in a sustainable way.

While many small towns will continue to provide traditional market functions, others are developing new roles. We can use what we learn from these towns to help other towns (for example those relatively disadvantaged by location or industrial history).

Nowadays, it is increasingly the private sector that will have to take a lead – perhaps by raising extra business rates to be invested locally. BT, for example, will be expected to meet the need for the fastest broadband connections. Also, local volunteers in these towns, who have proved their abilities as imaginative leaders, should be recognised for the strengths they have in developing and implementing locally-led policy and practice.

Our towns, however, will also need help and facilitation from the public sector: English Heritage, for example, may need to restore and reuse some of the built environment; local authorities must assist community ambitions through flexible planning policies and helpful investment in infrastructure; and town councils should be prepared to precept to achieve their aims. Equally, valuable help can be provided by the voluntary and charitable sectors. Finally, the new Local Enterprise Partnerships will also have opportunities to assist.

Of course, in a time of economic parsimony we cannot help all communities thrive. But we can improve our understanding of how they work, how best to support them, and how to help them to help others to achieve their own and wider policy goals. It is this that will lie at the heart of Small Towns for Tomorrow's research orientated work.

What is certain is that the huge potential of our small towns cannot be ignored. Small Towns for Tomorrow – established under the inspiring leadership of Professor Ray Pahl – is therefore to be congratulated for making sure that work to learn from and about our small towns continues.

Ewen Cameron
Lord Cameron of Dillington



Lord Cameron is a former Chairman of the Countryside Agency (1999-2004) and the Prime Minister's Rural Advocate (2000-2004). A former President of the Country Landowners Association (1995-1997), he has lobbied on behalf of the countryside for many years. He was knighted for services to the countryside in 2003. He currently represents rural interests as an independent crossbench Peer in the House of Lords, sits on the Lords EU sub-committee for Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries, and chairs the APPG on Agriculture, Food and Development. Ewen Cameron runs the Dillington Estate and Farms in Somerset. He chaired the Somerset Strategic Partnership from 2004 to 2010. He was founding chairman of Orchard Radio (1989-1999), running independent local radio stations in the South West, and also Lets Go Travel Ltd (a SW retail chain) (1998-2006). Ewen Cameron currently chairs internet travel company Airport Direct Travel.

Introduction

England's small country towns and large villages are home to around 11 million people, which is more than one-fifth of the total population. Many are to be found around much bigger urban areas, where they are part of the complex web of connections in what is now a highly integrated urban and rural economy. Others are interspersed among the more scattered populations of villages and hamlets where they perform key roles as service centres. Most of these places play a pivotal role for their residents. Importantly, they are the most rapidly growing settlements in England, expanding twice as fast as our larger towns and cities.

These 1,600 settlements are extremely diverse, with wide-ranging histories, characters and functions. Some are poor, some rich, some inland, some seaside, some picturesque, and some are essentially industrial or, more likely, post industrial. Many are now commuter towns.

It is perhaps this very diversity that has made it difficult to grasp and act upon the wider significance of these towns, their social and economic differences, and the contributions they make to policy concerns such as an ageing population, economic growth, public transport, housing, climate change and community activity. It may also be true that the traditional perception of these small towns as idyllic, rural 'market towns' or as simply shopping centres for a wider rural hinterland has influenced the way decision makers think about them.

In the past, policy making for rural towns has mostly been concerned with the specific character of individual towns rather than their wider role in the rural settlement system. It has been localised and discrete (focusing just on single towns) rather than part of a broader view designed to understand how these places contribute to a locality and 'work' as small communities. Neither

cities, nor villages, they have fallen between two stools when allocating help and resources.

Small Towns for Tomorrow thinks this should change, so we are putting forward the case for examining these towns carefully, discriminating between them, and using the evidence to ensure that policy and practice reflect real differences and take local contexts into account. If we do not, we will fail to capitalise on their many attributes and assets, or to equip them for the challenges ahead.

This document seeks to encourage a more strategic approach from all tiers of government and other decision makers. It also identifies areas for action so that small towns become towns of the future, not the past.

KEY FACTS

Small towns:

- contain 22% of the English population and are the second largest provider of jobs and businesses, after cities over 750,000 people;
- absorbed three-fifths of the population growth of England between 1991 and 2001;
- have the second highest proportion of national businesses (21%) and employees (17%), after Metropolitan areas¹;
- are the destination of a quarter of all daily work journeys and the source of about a third;
- comprise around 7% of rural land but accommodate 90% of rural people.

What we know about small towns

Our definition of small towns covers all settlements with a population of between 1,500 and 40,000 that are situated within open countryside, around bigger towns and cities, and in agricultural areas and hill country.

Recent work to classify small towns by their social and economic characteristics suggests that they fall within a small number of fairly clear groups. There are, for example, the fast growing small towns of the Bristol-Cambridge belt with young families and households and with workers in professional and administrative jobs. Their rapid growth often means that, relative to their size, they lack certain services such as a GP surgery or dentist.

There are numerous small towns and large villages on the former coalfields of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire that are socially and economically disadvantaged and lack basic services. Despite their already disadvantaged situation, these places have also experienced a disproportionate loss of post offices in recent years. There are the small retirement towns in coastal locations, mainly in the South and South West, with the particular needs of an ageing population. And there are small towns that have a predominance of routine workers in agriculture and manufacturing, often located in the more deeply rural areas where it is harder to access centres for education and training². Other types of rural town are clearly characterised by their demographic structure and employment mix, with significant differences at a local (sub-regional) level.

Many small towns act as hubs for services, housing, employment and commercial activities, both for those who live in them and for the more dispersed populations that surround and still, to varying degrees, depend upon them. Understanding

the relationship of town to rural hinterland is crucial to understanding development or regeneration potential.

Most of the rural population live and work in these towns. They are also currently the most rapidly growing settlements in England, expanding twice as fast as our larger towns and cities. In addition, because of their strong social cohesion, community bonds and roles as providers of culture, leisure, education and health services, many of these towns provide the quality of life to which people aspire.

Moving away from the ‘market town’ label

While it is true that the origins of the longest established towns lie in their traditional function as the central market places for the surrounding areas, this no longer adequately describes their wide-ranging roles today. They are now part of a much more complex integrated urban and rural economy that is undergoing fundamental change through the nature of communication, transport, and the impacts of technology.

Therefore the term ‘market town’ presents a false, oversimplistic picture of the varied and broader significance of these places, encouraging stereotypic, even romantic notions that are long out of date. These are not the self-contained isolated centres of Hardy and Trollope. And unless we move away from this blanket idea – by shifting our perceptions of and thinking about small towns – we will fail to capitalise on their many attributes and assets, or to equip them for the challenges ahead.

“There is a misconception that small towns are purely shopping centres for a wider rural hinterland. In reality they often have a complex economic foundation. It is vital that this is understood and clearly presented.”

Can we value what we have yet to measure?

According to the Commission for Rural Communities³, towns are in some ways “the ‘missing link’ in England’s spatial geography”. This is because nationally there is no agreed method for statistically separating small towns from urban areas.

Smaller towns (i.e. those with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants) are analysed as part of a broader ‘rural’ category, while larger towns are incorporated into a broader ‘urban’ category. This means that statistics analysed on this basis have not tracked social and economic trends as they affect towns and that, as a result, towns have been “generally overlooked from both a research and policy perspective”.

The lack of evidence and information about the nature of these towns, and how they function economically and socially, means they are not well understood. Unfortunately, since the 1939-45 war, policy has paid little attention to the wider role and potential of our small towns. Policies that have been developed specifically for small towns have tended to be local and small-scale.

A number of academics and private sector interests have undertaken work to develop more comprehensive approaches to identify and classify the diversity of small towns and to capture the true nature of each place and interrelationships between them⁴. Again, this has been ad hoc.

However, more recent research by the Rural Evidence Research Centre at Birkbeck College, University of London has set out to quantify the interaction between the three main policy-relevant characteristics of small towns. These are population, location relative to other settlements, and economic and communal activity. Although at an early stage, this kind of analysis will be invaluable to policy makers and others when making decisions about, for example, services, housing and investment.

Small towns have potential

It is argued that whereas large cities require increasingly massive infrastructure to sustain them, small towns are by their very nature more contained and, therefore, more sustainable. For example, small-scale solar, wind or hydro power schemes⁵ lend themselves to small settlements not least because until recently these places generated energy via mills or local works. Also, put simply, people can live and work in and around them, spending far less time and money on travel.

Increasingly new technologies allow people to work from home, to provide local employment and yet market their goods and services worldwide. People who work locally support the local economy, accessing education, cultural and leisure facilities. Of course, people need to meet one another, and towns also provide local venues for this.

Indeed, small towns are traditionally places in which people work together to shape their locality and provide activities and services that they, the local people, want. Rarely the recipients of large-scale funding, these communities have been found to have particularly high levels of self-organisation and volunteering, building on skills and knowledge.

For many small towns, the Market Towns Initiative (MTI) was the spur for successful community development over the past ten years. The ideas and approaches behind this venture, the success of which was due to the enthusiasm and skills of local people, volunteers and officials alike, have been developed and implemented by Action for Market Towns. The continuation and improvement of the MTI by other means reinforces our belief that there are opportunities for the experiences gained to be applied more widely.

What do we want to see happen?

We know that small towns and their people have had – and continue to have – a great deal to offer. But they are facing a number of challenges, including:

- prescriptive and reactive land use planning
- the changing nature of retail spending
- shifting demographics
- cutbacks in local government spending
- limited transport and access
- limited access to high-speed broadband Internet connections
- complex local government structures and levels of representation
- time and money pressures on partnerships, and
- the limited powers of town councils⁶.

In our view, the administrative structures that have been in place since the 1970s mean there is a lack of effective advocacy for small towns, and a lack of influence for those involved in their government and development.

There is also the pressure to balance the need for growth – in terms of population, housing, services and facilities – against the social, cultural, economic and environmental needs of existing communities and of new populations arriving in small towns. These places have the potential to absorb new people, indeed many need new people, but change must be planned for.

We have identified the following research topics that we believe would inform action and policy developments – and that would help small towns capitalise on their strengths and overcome some of the challenges they face:

- To investigate how land previously designated for industrial use could be best used, for example, as development for employment not housing.

-
- To explore how local policy development could be informed and influenced by locally-led community groups and then used to inform national and (sub-) regional planning policies. This would allow both the strengths of small towns and the constraints on them to be taken into account. It would also encourage locally-led sustainable development, and so enable the diversity of individual settlements to be recognised.
 - To examine ways to encourage and, if need be, incentivise, private developers to provide appropriate housing, and commercial space.
 - To undertake research to gain a better understanding of patterns of work, shopping, education and travel, in order to reduce the need for travel.
 - To continue studies into the need for and effectiveness of service delivery within a sub-regional (multi-town) context.
 - To investigate how to support and capitalise on the already high and visible levels of community activity in small towns through volunteering and partnership work designed, for example, to improve service delivery.
 - To explore how to strengthen and support local democracy, democratic accountability and the effectiveness and influence of town councils in order to help them exercise maximum powers locally, and to work with, rather than be dependent upon, higher tier local authorities.

Research along these lines will help policy makers at local and national level. It will also help practitioners such as community development workers and action-orientated voluntary sector organisations (such as Action for Market Towns) with their work for small towns. In short, it will build on the evidence base.

Building on the evidence base

It is important to base decisions on a thorough understanding of all types of towns and their relationships with the wider settlement hierarchy. For example, a strong town may be able to work with a weaker one. It would be in both their interests, and that of policy makers, for each to learn from the other, for the benefit of all.

We believe that small towns should be added to the research mix that so often concentrates on larger settlements as the sole source of all economic welfare and growth. We will commission research designed to examine the untapped potential of small towns to contribute to the country's economic and social development. We will also explore the role they have as centres of sustainable development (via, for example, research into energy use/CO₂ savings potential in small towns), and as places where people are happy to live, to work and to enjoy their free time.

Given recent trends in population and business growth, our small towns in rural areas have the potential to add significantly to economic and social well-being and to contribute significantly to the solution to some of the major environmental problems of our time. To bring this about we need a wider appreciation of the distinctiveness of 'small town England'. Through research, we need a better understanding of the way they link to the national (and global) economies and a clearer focus on policies that fit their characteristics and needs.

Notes

1. Commission for Rural Communities, *State of the countryside update: Market towns*, February 2011.
2. More information on these and the other main types of small town can be found in Shepherd, J. *A Typology of the Smaller Rural Towns of England* on the Rural Evidence Research Centre website (www.nerc.ac.uk) or the Action for Market Towns website (www.towns.org.uk)
3. Commission for Rural Communities, *State of the countryside update: Market towns*, February 2011.
4. This includes studies undertaken by Professor Andrew Errington (Universities of Reading and Plymouth), Professor John Shepherd (Birkbeck College, University of London), Roger Tym & Partners and Emma Delow (with Land Use Consultants).
5. For example, see Settle Hydro case study:
<http://tinyurl.com/63cthgl>
6. Morris, G., and Nichols, C. 2007. *Strengthening the Role of Rural Councillors*, CRC, Cheltenham.

About us

Small Towns for Tomorrow is a group of concerned individuals, practitioners, academics, representatives of central and local government, and the private sector who wish to develop and promote a greater understanding of the issues facing small towns across the UK. We work with key agencies and opinion formers to influence the national, regional and sub-regional policy-making process as an informed, unbiased voice on issues relating to small towns.

If you would like to get involved with the work of **Small Towns for Tomorrow**, and for more details, please visit our website at: www.smalltownsfortomorrow.org. Alternatively, contact any of the following:

■ **Economic Development:**

Gerald Milward-Oliver / gerald@changingtowns.co.uk
07802 335969

■ **Community:**

Dr. Gordon Morris / gm@tanglewood.u-net.com
07917 577285

■ **Evidence:**

Prof. John Shepherd / j.shepherd@bbk.ac.uk
07801 079249

■ **Policy/action:**

Alison Eardley / alison.eardley@towns.org.uk
07876 598957



Supported by Action for Market Towns
www.towns.org.uk

Small Towns for Tomorrow

www.smalltownsfortomorrow.org