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Review of 2012  
Built Environment  
Forum Scotland  
(BEFS) Congress



# Review of 2012 Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) Congress

*Small Town Scotland. November 2012*

The aim of the BEFS 2012 Congress, which was held in Linlithgow Burgh Halls, was to profile small towns in Scotland, focusing on threats they face; opportunities they present; and their potential to become economic drivers.

**Professor Emeritus Cliff Hague** set the context by noting the range of thresholds across the UK and Europe that define 'Small towns', from 3-10k up to 35k residents (small towns in China = 500k!), and that they are where approximately 1/3 of Scotland's population live.

He noted that small towns are a critical, but often neglected component of Scotland's built environment; being important to Scotland's identity, its tourism offer and the local economies and residents they serve. However, such places also face major challenges in terms of retaining their services, as well as their character.

The topic of small towns occupies a policy 'middle ground', which is shaped by a raft of recent or current consultations in relation to the built environment, including: Agenda for Cities; Town Centres Review; Architecture and Placemaking; review of SPP; NPF3; Community Empowerment; SHEP; procurement; and general budget pressure and review.

Leading up to the event, BEFS carried out a 'Small Towns Health Check' aided by a checklist, which considered criteria in relation to 'Built environment', 'Competitiveness and innovation', 'Social life and cohesion', and 'Sustainable development and environmental resilience'. More information is available [here](#), and an article by Professor Emeritus Cliff Hague on Small Towns in Scotland is also available.

Cliff described some international examples of where small towns had sought to reinvigorate their economies: Notodden (pop: 12 000) in Norway hosts an annual blues festival; Cesky Krumloc (pop: 15 000) in the Czech Republic established a company to market property and recycle profits for the good of the community; in the town of Regent (pop: 211!) in North Dakota, USA, a local artist has lined a highway with art works; in turn attracting a grant four times the annual town council budget. In each case ideas are driven by an individual with vision and passion for their place.

The main conclusions from the introductory session were:

- Identify, and build upon, local assets (place, and people)
- An integrated approach is required



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*Cliff Hague, BEFS Chair with Jo Robertson, BEFS Historic Environment Officer*

- Don't be scared to try – experiment with small trial projects
- Learn from what others are doing
- Involve residents and users



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 Douglas Scott, Chair of Scottish Small Towns Group

Douglas Scott, Chair of Scottish Small Towns Group, stressed the vulnerability and fragility of many small towns and the need to make more of their strengths and opportunities. He described various 'types' of small towns (city commuter; traditional industries; market/service; tourist/ retirement and island), their differing roles, and their many differing challenges, e.g.:

- Being vulnerable to economic change (disproportionate impact of business closure)
- Mobility and accessibility to wider economic opportunities
- Moving to a low carbon economy
- Public expenditure reductions
- Structural changes in retailing
- Physical condition / deterioration (affects self confidence)
- Socio economic issues (poverty, etc)
- Ageing populations

Opportunities stem from building on a unique sense of place; strong local networks; the potential of cultural, arts and leisure; liveability/quality of life; and locally active communities. A suggested approach was to develop a vision for the future, prepare a 'whole town plan', masterplan a town centre development zone, integrate community planning ambitions, carry out a health check, and produce a realistic and practical action plan that is updated annually.

Douglas spoke of the need to base decisions on more information and research data (e.g. retailing, socio economic studies, bench marking, physical condition survey, best practice), and the importance of resourcing and co-ordinating cross sector input (e.g. community development trusts, BIDS, urban regeneration companies, and small towns funding to pump prime investment).

**Key conclusions were:**

- More research and understanding of good practice
- A need for greater understanding and recognition of small towns in public policy

- Consider the role of small towns in the regional and local development planning context
- Co-ordinate national support for small towns

**Douglas Wheeler (Douglas Wheeler Associates)** spoke of the need for a joined up approach to economic regeneration that linked ‘hard/physical’ and ‘softer’ considerations such as marketing, cultural and creative initiatives. This requires the application of multi-disciplinary skills across spatial strategies, development frameworks, local economic masterplans, and delivery / action programmes.

Research by the Scottish Government on the Town Centre Review has noted that issues are complex, multi-dimensional and not just physical; that town scale offers distinctiveness; that partnerships are required to develop a vision, implement strategy, and deliver action; that there is limited data on small and medium sized businesses; and the important role of community ownership of assets.

Small Towns are economic drivers (e.g. through delivery of local services), benefiting from strong community capital and developed relationships and networks. They face an array of challenges (many as described by the previous presenter), and their unique response needs to be founded on understanding ‘what kind of town do you want to be, and what actions are required to deliver that?’ This requires: co-ordinated delivery across different sectors; drive from a local facilitator/agitator; targeting of small independent business; actions which represent more than simply an investment in public realm and building improvements.

Douglas spoke of the opportunity for new initiatives, particularly in relation to the 2014 Year of Homecoming and the Ryder Cup; how social media might build communities of interest; how the use of the public realm might be programmed to promote events; and, providing support for business start up. Small towns have potential to promote cultural and creative industries in many ways: through history and heritage, manufacture/retail of creative goods and services, supporting creative networks, piloting incubator and start-up initiatives, events and festivals, offering visitor packages, and using community ownership as an attraction and anchor for economic activity.

Place initiatives should be distinct and diverse, and reflect the authentic spirit of the place. They may involve townscape heritage initiatives; renovation of business premises; shop front design; enterprise hubs and incubators. It is important to work with local owners and landowners (rather than absentee owners) who realise benefits of safeguarding the capital asset, and maintaining an income stream. Marketing and promotion is important in achieving regeneration through rebranding, which may also engage with Visit Scotland and Creative Scotland, offer ‘family friendly’ packages, and source local food and produce.



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Douglas Wheeler, Douglas Wheeler Associates

### Key conclusions were:

- Integrate strategies and action plans to ensure a whole town / joined-up approach
- be proactive and locally driven – speak with one voice
- Focus on the small, local independent retailer
- Improve project planning, and deliver short/medium term outcomes
- There needs to be a person behind it - consider the need for a town facilitator / agitator.



Malcolm Fraser spoke in his role as Chair of the Scottish Government's National Review of Town Centres, and opened by quoting Nicola Sturgeon: "We want to take every measure possible to ensure our high streets are vibrant places". The review is underpinned by five principles:

1. Be deliverable / make a difference
2. Focus on town centres (rather than other myriad related issues)
3. Communities must decide what is best for them
4. Diversity / care about the total offer
5. Need to be 'bottom up' – "things that make a difference come from surprising corners"



The work is focusing on several themes:

1. A. Living in the High Street – remove the residential leasehold barrier for property 'above the shop'; attract first time buyers into this housing market and increase life and activity in town centres
2. B. Community development – sustain local business; provide a database of vacant property that links with potential occupiers; create a self sustaining regeneration fund that primes investment
3. C. Accessible public services – potential to locate services in town centre; benefits health and wellbeing of community; increase footfall and stimulate local economy
4. D. A friendly planning system – be more welcoming and open to change
5. E. Planning for physical change – extend Designing Streets; town centres overvalued - lobby for business rates change; out-of-town should be charged more – create a level playing field.

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*Malcolm Fraser, Chair of the Scottish Government Review of Town Centres*

**Magnus Linklater** hosted a panel debate which covered a range of issues prompted by the morning sessions, and which emphasised a need for a multiplicity of approaches; there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’:

- Don’t impose top down; work from grass roots up
- Life of town centres being sapped by out-of-town developments
- The need for agitators at local level (but they must take the town community with them!)
- The recession has arguably created conditions for entrepreneurial activity
- Build on the unique assets of a place
- Lively places are self policing
- The need to make town centres social places - tackle licensing issues
- The urgent need to bring vacant floor space into productive use
- Do we need more strategies... or action? ... More demonstration projects?
- Spaces where people are allowed to do things – incubator / mentor opportunities
- Small projects have catalytic effects
- A ‘rough and ready’ approach – how small towns evolved

Magnus’s summing up noted the tremendous degree of enthusiasm and passion to tackle the problem and help to address the fate of small towns.

**Derek Mackay MSP, Minister for Local Government and Planning** started the afternoon session, by noting the importance of small towns and that the built environment cannot be taken for granted. He spoke of several Government consultations and reviews that relate to placemaking. His desire is that planning should enable the right sort of development, based on four pillars: a plan-led system; streamline and simplify; delivering development; and overcoming delays.

He described a range of Government workstreams underway to support small towns, and the need to align policies, with e.g. the NPF being conducted in tandem with a review of SPP. He was enthusiastic about a charrette style approach to driving forward Development Plans, and the importance of the Community



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*Magnus Linklater introducing the morning panel debate*

*BEFS Board member Bill Pagan greets Derek Mackay MSP*



Empowerment Bill in transferring power to local communities.

Questions addressed the need for a more planning friendly environment that removed barriers to act quickly; tackling empty property that blights a community; the carbon cost of demolition; and that community councils can, and should, be as proactive as they need to be: “do whatever you want to do for your community”.



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*Ron Smith, Linlithgow Civic Trust*

**Ron Smith, of Linlithgow Civic Trust**, described Linlithgow’s challenges and opportunities, and how town expansion might be harnessed for the good of the local community. He was critical of the local authority’s ‘poorly implemented restraint policy’ and a ‘reliance on public authorities to respond to the town’s needs’.

Identifying future community needs (e.g. reduce traffic pressures on High Street/ town by-pass; safeguard central land for future economic and business interest; etc) helped to translate a vision into a required/tangible amount of development to achieve a financial return that would enable the community’s ambitions to be realised. This approach took a ‘realistic and pragmatic’ approach to the future; recognising that development is likely to happen, and that this can be anticipated so that the Development Plan can be realistic and operate for the local community.

**Liz Davidson, from Glasgow City Council**, talked about ‘putting a value on place’ and spoke about her experiences in helping to tackle the challenges of reinvigorating parts of the Merchant City and other areas in Glasgow. She described how empty shop units weren’t being rented because they were basically ‘un-lettable’; how the cost of upgrading these was recouped through rents within the first year; the need to avoid accepting the ‘best bidder’, but to work with (and rent to) the ‘right’ developer/tenant, who will do their best for the local area; and a need for dynamism and sense of purpose.

Liz illustrated the need for, and spoke of a critical mass of diversity and a mix of different uses to ensure a lively and vibrant High Street. She spoke of the need for a level playing field; how the free market economy was ‘not a fair fight’; that large retailers avoid paying tax; how ‘loss leaders’ and price fixing can cripple independent traders; how there is a need to charge out of town retailing for car parking.

She was critical of shopping malls that privatise public space, that sanitise the shopping and social experience; of absentee landlords that aren’t interested in the place; and identified the importance of ensuring a high quality public realm: getting the bins off the street; occupying vacant units through temporary or pop-up uses; and creating attractive public spaces.

**Julian Dobson, of Urban Pollinators**, expressed an urgent need to change from ‘me’ to ‘we’ towns; and asked, after the Portas Review, ‘is there a recipe for successful town centres?’

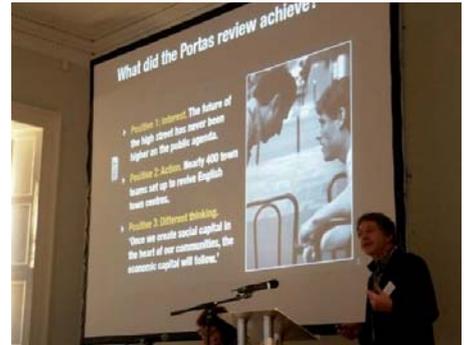
The 'positives' from the Portas Review were:

- Interest - the future of the High Street has never been more debated
- Action – nearly 400 town teams have been set up in England
- Different thinking – awareness that once we create social capital in the heart of our communities then economic capital will follow



The 'negatives' of the Portas Review have been:

- Poor analysis – the review failed to consider wider factors
- Confusion – the review presented a menu of options, not a strategy for positive change
- Inadequate response to the issues



^ Julian Dobson, *Urban Pollinators*

Julian questioned whether the might of the small town could act as an engineer for a new urbanism, using the small scale to 'get things done' due to: institutional frameworks; business interests not dominating; not having entrenched political approach; everyone contributing ideas. Whilst the cities are 'signing up to the same types of ideas', there is a chance for towns to be different and distinctive.

The problems with 'me' towns are that: I want to park my car... I want to protect my margins and income streams... I don't want to re-value downwards ... I want 'big brands' (but they suck money out of the community); I'm a consumer – don't expect me to contribute!

Examples of how small towns might think differently (... with 'big hearts'?)

- A) Totness, Devon – said 'no' to Costa coffee; clonestopping; people can make a difference
- B) Totally Locally, Calderdale – spending locally supports local shops
- C) Todmorden – supporting local economy and producers changes how people feel about their place
- D) Hebden Bridge – owned by community to showcase local produce
- E) Wigan – offer rewards for supporting local
- F) JFDI Urbanism (Just Have Fun and Do It) – think differently about the place you live in

## How can this be made to happen?

- Multifunctionality – not just retail, but also civic; keep public facilities in the town centre to generate footfall which supports local spend
- Support local – act as citizens and not just as shoppers; spend idle time usefully!
- Create access for start-up – link the civic, community and commercial; have a positive attitude; move from ‘why?’ to ‘why not?’



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*Sarah Boyack MSP*

## Sarah Boyack MSP facilitated a Q+A session that raised a range of issues:

- A need to control the market; don't rely on private sector development; some investment needs to come from the public purse; the Heritage Lottery Fund has helped to address market failure
- Planning needs to be positive – manage, enable, promote
- Money needs to recycle for the community benefit
- High Streets are failing – they are part of everyone's experience; need to tackle the 'faceless' sector – offshore developers and shareholders; people who aren't interested and never visit site
- Town centres are being held to ransom – we need more confidence to take action
- Town centres for co-production of services
- Not all entrepreneurs and developers are the same – choose who you want to work with; look for allies, unusual suspects, people who are enthusiastic and passionate
- Invest for the long term – bring revenue returns to investors and communities
- Planning authorities 'lack backbone'
- It starts with the people ... do they care? Do they want to make a difference?
- Will the institutions help or frustrate?

Cliff Hague, BEFS Chair, closed the Congress by reflecting on some key points:

The need to move from 'why' to 'why not'; Pilot ideas, and scale them up; Create a new generation of agitators (connect with youth), but don't leave the community behind!

He closed by warning of the possible 'ghost town' effect (evident in parts of the USA) where places lose their reason for being, and they become empty and run down... unless there is a will to make things happen; we need to chart a different way forward!



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*Cliff Hague, BEFS Chair*

*All images courtesy of Abigail Daly*

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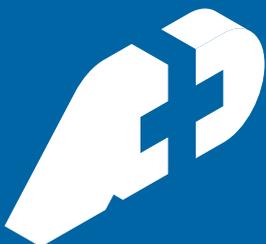
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