

DUMFRIES: THE STOVE and MIDSTEEPLE QUARTER



CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

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The Carnegie UK Trust has been supporting the Stove (an artist-led community hub and Development Trust in Dumfries) to share their learning about community and town development.

This case study is an expanded version of a chapter of the Turnaround Towns UK report, which draws together nine stories of towns around the United Kingdom who are transforming their futures¹.

At the Carnegie UK Trust, we believe towns are home to vibrant and innovative communities, and we are working to support towns and regional bodies to develop strategies to improve the wellbeing of their places. Discussions on towns too often focus merely on saving or preserving rather than progressing or rethinking. We believe that community and artist-led regeneration can offer imaginative solutions to the challenges facing our towns.

The Carnegie UK Trust has offered in-kind support to the Stove in [the EMBERS project](#)², which seeks to map, advocate for and support the burgeoning movement of creative place-makers in Dumfries and Galloway. As part of this partnership the Carnegie UK Trust have created a case study of the Stove's approach to town regeneration.

1 Introduction

Dumfries is a town of just over 30,000 people in Dumfries and Galloway in the south of Scotland. The town is bisected by the River Nith, which then runs on to the Solway Firth. Dumfries is a Royal Burgh and market town, and was once home to the poet Robert Burns. The town hosts the Crichton university campus, shared by the University of the West of Scotland, the University of Glasgow, and Dumfries and Galloway College.

2 What the situation was

Dumfries town centre grew around a thriving market, a busy port, and a high street that was home to many residents. The combination of commercial, industrial and residential use brought vitality to the market town known as 'The Queen of the South'.

Through the latter decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the town centre of Dumfries suffered. Residents moved out of the town centre, shopping habits changes, and then a recession challenged the viability of the retailers who dominated the high street.

1 Forthcoming upon publication of this case study: Carnegie UK Trust (2019) Turnaround Towns UK.

2 EMBERS is funded by [the South of Scotland Economic Partnership](#)

In 2010 a report proclaimed Dumfries had changed 'from clone town to ghost town', transforming from a street dominated by chain retailers to a street with increasingly empty shop fronts³. As independents had given way to chains, the chains themselves appeared increasingly vulnerable.

There were no longer people living on the High Street. In the evening, the formerly vibrant town appeared deserted.

3 What it became

Today Dumfries high street is home to The Stove Network, the first artist-led Community Development Trust in the UK. The Stove Network ('The Stove') is working with the community and using creativity to reinvigorate public life in the town centre.

Based at 100 High Street - which incorporates a ground floor café and outdoor area, first floor exhibition space and third floor workspace - The Stove has been an engine of creativity in the town since 2011 when it secured its premises.

In 2016, The Stove won a Scotland's Regeneration Forum (SURF) Award in Creative Regeneration for its work in renewing the town centre of Dumfries. The Network has now given rise to plans for a new town block called the Midsteeple Quarter: a project to regenerate the town centre by bringing homes and affordable enterprise space back to the high street. The Midsteeple Quarter project outlines an alternative purpose for town high streets, where creativity and culture complement the commercial role of the town centre.

Although for now there are still 'To let' signs and empty windows in Dumfries town centre, there is also a regular programme of cultural and community events, opportunities for creative employment, and soon there will be homes on the high street.

3 NEF (2010) Reimagining the High Street. Available at: https://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/1da089b4b1e-66ba2b3_v8m6b0c0w.pdf

4 How it happened

The Stove supports the local creative economy and network of creative practitioners in the region. It also acts as a forum to involve the community in planning and the development of Dumfries as a thriving town to live in.

Stove as town artist

The Stove began in 2011 as a collective of local artists who came together to take on responsibility of a high street property.

The Chamber of Commerce had bought 100 High Street to provide a cultural showcase for Dumfries. The plan did not reach fruition, and faced with the prospect of losing the chance of a centrally located cultural hub, the Stove Network presented an alternate plan to the Council. The property would become a public arts centre, bringing life back to the town centre by anchoring creativity and community activity in the high street.

The property was transferred to Dumfries and Galloway Council free of charge, who now lease it to the Stove Network long term. Since reopening the hub in 2015, 100 High Street provides The Stove with a high street building from which to encourage conversations within the community.



Source: The Stove Network

Supporting the creative economy

The Stove offers employment and career development opportunities to artists and creative professionals within the region. It provides direct employment to a team of curators and staff, offers opportunities for one off commissions and acts as an incubator to creative young people in the area. Since 2011, it has been responsible for supporting the development of three new arts organisations: Environmental Arts Festival Scotland, Dumfries Music Conference, and D-LUX Festival of Lighting.

Creative, engaging, flexible work in the town gives people who may have moved opportunities to come home for, as well as giving young people looking for work experience in the creative industries a reason to stay. Blueprint 100 offers young people curatorial experience and support over a year, in which they develop the practical application of their skills and contribute to the Stove's programme of public events.

By offering varied employment opportunities with different amounts of time commitment and at different levels, people are able to work with The Stove alongside their own creative practice, alongside another job or education commitment. The network and the hub at 100 High Street anchors professional artistic practice in the town and the region. Retaining creative talent leads to a multiplier effect nurturing a vibrant local creative economy.

Revitalising Dumfries

From the outset, The Stove has been dedicated to revitalising the town through harnessing the strength of the local community and local artists. The Stove facilitates creativity in everyday spaces through public art and events in the town centre, as well as providing a hub for community activities at 100 High Street.

The role of the artist, and artistic skills, are vital in the way that The Stove connects with the community. Articulated as artist-led practice, The Stove uses the creative production of a curator to encourage the community-led development of ideas for the town.

The Stove Network brings playfulness, imagination, conversation and a willingness to take risks to community-led development, with curators acting as both an instigator and facilitator, hosting community discussions about the future of the town, and maintaining a focus on practical actions from the small to the substantial.

For example, as part of the 'Inbetween: Dumfries' festival in 2012, artist [Hannah Brackston](#) developed 'Nithscoping': a project that explored the relationship of people in Dumfries with the River Nith. Formed of a bespoke kit and facilitated by the artist, around 250 people took part in the project, which invited people to switch their view of a familiar feature of the town by opening up a close view of the riverbed. This challenged views on river management practices as well as the cultural significance of the Nith.

The approach the Stove uses draws on their own connection to the town – the artists who campaigned for 100 High Street in 2011, and the curatorial team (joint Creative Directors for The Stove) are rooted in the community. The Stove offers a model of artist-led regeneration that builds upwards from the community. It isn't a model of regeneration that is community consulted or community engaged, but instead it is created by the community itself.

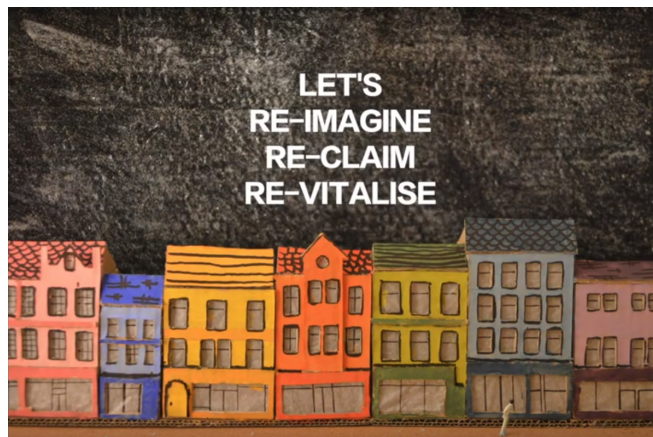
The Stove's activities in the town are for their home audience, and reflect their understanding of their hometown, rather than for an external image of Dumfries. Together the community and the artists diagnose the problems, imagine solutions, and carve out opportunities to make change.

Housing for the high street

Since 2011, many of The Stove Network projects facilitated discussion with local people about the future of Dumfries town centre, recognising that retail no longer brings the vibrancy the community needs.

The absence of homes on the high street was a recurring theme in these conversations. Whereas now only one person permanently lived above the

high street, people could remember when families inhabited the flats above the shops, creating a bustling community. The residents brought life to the high street as well as custom to the shops.



Source: [Midsteeple Quarter](#)

Vision – ‘a beating heart for the town’

In 2016, the Stove commissioned ‘[A House on the High Street](#)’, a film that explored this change. A screening organised by a community member sparked the idea of a town centre block owned and regenerated by the community, bringing vacant and underused properties back to life. The audience involved local leaders including senior members of the local authority and nearby universities. They formed a partnership to scope out the practicalities of a community-owned high street block.

“ A brighter future for the high street isn’t all about shops and shopping. It’s about people. ”

“ The future’s definitely not in retail is it; I think that’s fairly obvious. You should come here for the experience, you should be able to learn new skills, you should be able to try things out... It should be a unique experience that you come here for, not a new top, or sponges. ”

The area of the high street the partnership identified is called ‘Midsteeple Quarter’ after the Grade A listed Midsteeple building that dominates the town centre. Plans for the block will diversify the high street, combining homes with enterprise spaces for working, making and selling. The project’s multiple uses will give the community control over commercial and creative opportunities in the high street, as well as giving them power to tackle the housing pressure faced in the town.

In 2018, the project launched as a Community Benefit Society, accompanied by the first outing of a new group of volunteers, the Doon Toon Army.

Due to the complexities of high street ownership, many of the vacant properties that first inspired Midsteeple Quarter were out of reach – not on the market or valued beyond the community’s financial means. Instead, they worked with the council to secure an Asset Transfer of the one publicly owned property in the block – 135-139 High Street, which is now known as The Oven.

With ownership of their first property, the Midsteeple Quarter launched a national architectural competition to propose how the site would look and work, in partnership with Glasgow School of Architecture. The winning design, voted for by the community, uses The Oven as the flagship property.

Right now – ‘creative caretaking’

As the site is pending development, the building is in a phase of ‘creative caretaking’. This uses the downstairs space to continue the conversation about the town centre through hosting events and exhibitions.

As part of the D-LUX light festival in 2018, and supported by Dumfries and Galloway Council, an installation called ‘Whose Hoose is This?’ projected films into the upper windows of the building, controlled juke-box style by passers-by. The title of the installation adorns the shop front still, provoking passers-by to reconsider the use of the building.

As well as directly addressing the future of the Midsteeples Quarter project, the Bakers Oven works as a flexible space for community use, such as hosting the Dumfries Women Signwriters Squad and a pop-up flea market.

In 2019, a crowdfunding campaign to purchase two additional properties raised over £23,000 in 28 days. Though ultimately unsuccessful at auction, the rapid reaction to the opportunity to buy these properties demonstrated the commitment of the community to the project.

Lessons: Midsteeples Quarter.....

...uses different funding pots to build community wealth

Midsteeples Quarter (and the Stove Network that first developed the project) has enjoyed a positive relationship with local and national government who are keen to see the town centre revitalised. Following the Midsteeples Quarter proposition, the council created a Town Centre Living Fund of £1 million pounds, and the project successfully bid for funds to create the Community Benefit Society that would deliver the overall project and the initial design stage of Phase 1 'The Oven'. The Midsteeples Quarter project has also accessed funding from philanthropic trusts, Creative Scotland and Scottish Government, as well as the financial support of their community membership.

The broad appeal of the project – to restore the high street, to develop homes and space for the community, to offer affordable workspace and to support a cultural offer in the town centre – means a variety of funding opportunities can be accessed.

The initial public investment has secured a lasting asset owned by the community. This will become a financially sustainable source of community wealth providing homes and enterprise space and contributing to a thriving and creative high street.

... influences local and national policy to secure support and create opportunities

The Midsteeples Quarter project demonstrates many of the principles promoted by the

Scottish Government – localism, community empowerment and ownership, inclusive growth, and place-based working.

However, due to the innovative nature of the project – the first community-owned development of a high street – the project is navigating a legislative and policy landscape not necessarily built for the challenge. While Community Asset Transfer allowed The Oven to be transferred to the Community Benefit Society, as the rest of the town block is owned privately, application of the existing Community Right to Buy legislation is presenting a challenge in an urban context.

By harnessing the interest shown in their work by politicians and policymakers, the team have been able to advocate for the needs of their pioneering project.

... acts with the permission of the community

The Midsteeples Quarter project is rooted in the deep listening undertaken by The Stove Network within their own community over many years. While clear about the question – what is the purpose of our town centre? – the answers were not pre-formulated. Instead, they grew out of the different events, projects and conversations over five years of development, and continue to grow.

When the idea for Midsteeples Quarter was formulated, the consent of the community was 'formalised' in a local survey. The survey asked local people for their opinions about the use of the high street, and the potential development of housing. The response was overwhelmingly positive with a significant response rate. The growing membership (now over 400) and regular open meetings of the Midsteeples Quarter project show the continued momentum of the project.

The Stove Network set out to empower their community to respond to the challenges facing the high street, aided by the skills of the creative community. The project that resulted – the Midsteeples Quarter and The Oven – remains community-led.

... stewards an ongoing, local conversation

The Midsteple Quarter project grew out of the Stove's commitment to a cycle of questioning, listening, and responding. The practice of public conversation requires facilitation – a space, information, provocation, recording, and reiteration. The outcome has been the transfer of The Oven and the beginning community-led renewal of the high street.

The creative skills that have allowed this conversation to flourish include a willingness to question the status quo; a commitment to flattening hierarchies; seeking out stories and experiences; close observation and attention; and an ability to speak both relationally and practically⁴. For Dumfries, the Stove Network have stewarded their local conversation into a tangible outcome – local ownership of the high street.

... is open to experimenting and committed to action

The Midsteple Quarter project grew from a commitment to action. This requires a willingness to take risks and to experiment.

Instead of seeking a single silver bullet for the town, regular public interventions under the direction of the curatorial team allow the community to be surprised, for excitement to grow, and to spark other ideas.

⁴ Unwin, J. (2018) Kindness, Emotions and Human Relationships; the blind spot in public policy. Available at: <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/kindness-emotions-and-human-relationships-the-blind-spot-in-public-policy/>

The excitement of community events, which enliven public spaces and bring the community together, leads to the ambitious thinking needed for a local group to plan a new town quarter and take ownership of a high street building. It is the cumulative bustle of public creativity over a number of years that signals a change for the town centre.

5 Conclusion

The Stove's model of artist-led practice combines creativity and community, and offers lessons for those seeking to engage people in the future of their town.

The work of The Stove has brought employment opportunities to Dumfries, and new assets into community control. Both 100 High Street, the home of The Stove, and The Oven in the Midsteple Quarter have brought new civic infrastructure to the town centre, repositioning it as the centre for community conversations and cultural life, no longer only reliant on retail.

by: Issy Petrie, Policy and Development Officer

