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Journeys of Understanding: Domestic twinning as an approach to improving town capacity and wellbeing

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Key Benefits of Domestic Town Twinning

Wellbeing Impact

Environment

Improving towns as a visitor destination and for the benefit of old and new residents



New cycle routes and family focused cycling initiatives in Northern Ireland.



Physical improvements focused on improving the quality of place through planting schemes, and most towns led town centre cleans.

Social

The digital footprint of towns



Recognising importance of digital gateways to town's visitor offer and community engagement.



New and updated websites for all six towns.



Social media strategies focusing on telling their town's story.

Economic

Markets as a source of income and sustainability



Street, artisan and farmers markets.



Initial practical projects led to recognition of further themes being equally important to towns participating:

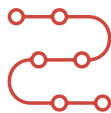


Identity and Place

Building identity and sense of place engendering civic pride



Renewed or newly recognised importance of these factors in sustaining their places.



Heritage trails developed in some towns.



Community engagement as a result of 'clean-ups' in some towns.

Leadership and Citizenship

Building community leadership capacity and recognising community assets



Emergence of 'unlikely' leaders



Transfer of assets to community control and recognition of existing assets for the first time



Heritage

1. Introduction

Towns matter. They matter to the wellbeing of two out of five of our population¹ who live in them, and their voting intentions now increasingly matter to those who govern the four jurisdictions of the UK, with the ‘Brexit’ referendum vote demonstrating what happens when a lack of investment and voice for towns at spatial planning and policy levels² is felt by those communities.

‘The divisive debate surrounding the EU referendum highlights a growing public discontent with the outcomes which current policy is delivering for places and people.’

Ellis, H. and Hetherington, K. TCPA³

Towns may have been historically neglected at policy level and still lack a cross-jurisdictional advocacy organisation⁴, yet the work of Carnegie UK Trust through its ‘Flourishing Towns’ focus

demonstrates that towns are the very places where social innovation and improved wellbeing, through empowered grassroots community groups, is happening. The towns where we live influence our quality of life, health and work: and a town that flourishes impacts its ability to interact and benefit from the wider social and economic opportunities around it.

It is with this belief – in the significant wellbeing benefits of flourishing towns to our population – that Carnegie UK Trust in 2016 embarked on a small-town domestic twinning programme across the UK, known as ‘Twin Towns UK’ (TTUK). The trial programme sought to boost the development of selected towns, not through major grant investment or specific output focused funding streams, but through supporting a process of learning and collaboration. By pairing 10 towns across the UK that had similar characteristics and socio-economic challenges, the Trust aimed to discover what benefits there were, if any, for towns in learning about another’s circumstances and their response to challenges facing their own place’s sustainability. This report summarises the process, what happened, the learning from the programme, and makes recommendations for the consideration of town and place-based policymakers, funders and practitioners.

- 1 *Quantifying Kindness, public engagement and place: Experiences of people in the UK and Ireland (2018)*, Wallace J and Thurman B; Carnegie UK Trust.
- 2 *Remaking British Towns after Brexit: key actions for Policy Makers and Planners (2018)*, MacLennan, D. and Macauley, H. for Carnegie UK Trust.
- 3 Ellis, H. and Hetherington, K. TCPA; *Planning can be central to the politics of change*. The Planner 3.08.2016
- 4 Ibid.



2. About

About the Twin Towns UK Programme

Twin Towns UK is part of the Carnegie UK Trust 'Flourishing Towns' strategy⁵ to promote vibrant, innovative town communities. The twinning programme aimed to seek solutions to boosting social and economic growth, with participating towns being tasked to work together, supported by the Trust, in order to develop approaches that might contribute towards their town's future.

Three outcomes were intended to be met through the programme (see figure 1).

Activity relating to Outcome 1, focusing on the use of data, largely took place in Phase One of the programme, whilst evidence-based learning for Outcomes 2 and 3 has been largely focussed on qualitative evaluation commissioned

externally⁶ and observation through facilitated reflective sessions with participants.

About our towns

From its inception in September 2016, with a call to participation to small towns across the UK, the programme was intentionally non-prescriptive in nature. The focus was on providing support and modest funding to facilitate relationship building and the identification of towns-based challenges and their solutions common to each partnership. A broad definition of 'small town' was taken – in common with the diversity of town definitions across the four UK jurisdictions⁷ – with applications being received from towns with populations from only 1,900 to over 80,000.

5 *Improving Wellbeing: Strategic Plan 2016-2020* (2016), Carnegie UK Trust.

6 *Carnegie UK Trust Twin Towns Initiative: External Evaluation* (2018), Janet Biggar Research and The Lines Between. Available at Trust website: www.carnegieuk.org

7 *Searching for Space: What place for towns in public policy?* p.5 (2017), Pennycook L; Carnegie UK Trust.

Figure 1: Carnegie UK Trust's Flourishing Towns Outcomes, 2016-2020



Figure 2: Map of UK showing location of 10 participant towns & Meet the towns



Meet the towns

Berwick-Upon-Tweed (NE England) and **Fishguard & Goodwick** (North Pembrokeshire, Wales): *two coastal towns experiencing remoteness from region and focusing on tourism*

Wooler (NE England) and **Broughshane** (Antrim, Northern Ireland): *two small rural towns interested in both tourism and enterprise opportunities*

Merthyr Tydfil (South Wales) and **North Shields** (NE England): *towns with industrial pasts seeking to re-vitalise their town centres*

Whitburn (West Lothian, central Scotland) and **Oswaldtwistle** (Lancashire): *two 'ribbon' ex-coal mining towns taking a creative approach to community engagement and regeneration*

Newbiggin-by-the-Sea (NE England) and **Withernsea** (East Riding of Yorkshire): *two coastal towns with challenges of isolation and employment*

TWIN TOWNS UK

Supporting the process throughout, an Expert Reference Group of towns policy and practitioners drawn from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland selected towns and proposed their respective pairings through analysis of socio-economic data available for each town, such as population trends, former industries and current employment challenges, town geography and scale. The data, considered alongside the capacity of the representative organisation, its representative 'status' at local and regional level and its vision for its towns' future, led to 10 towns being proposed for twinning.

The final five pairings selected reflected coastal communities, ex-industrial centres and rural communities, which were previously almost entirely dependent on agriculture. Lead organisations ranged from community development trusts to a community council, an arts-based social enterprise, a regeneration partnership, Chambers of Trade and Commerce and a Business Improvement District.

One of the early successes of the programme was the effort made by some town lead organisations to ensure adequate representation of their place-based community's stakeholders, developing a project team with a wide range of (sometimes

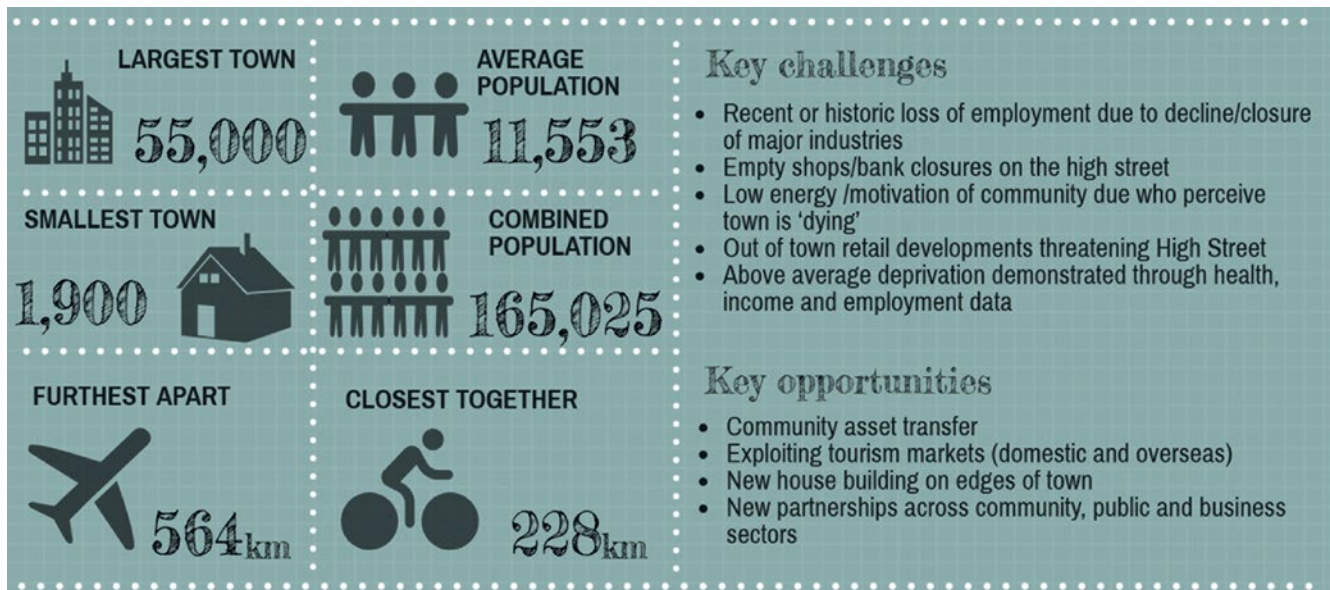
'Relationships in our own town have been improved . . . this should have been our starting point.'

John Devlin, Whitburn Community Development Trust

'Prior to the project, Whitburn organisations had limited interaction with each other but working closely, sharing achievements and stressful situations has built some solid relationships which have seen further collaborations on additional projects such as an Easter Event . . . and school children Holiday club.'

Carol Kelly, on behalf of Whitburn Together Project team

Figure 3: Twin Towns Vital Statistics



competing) grassroots community groups and local democratic representation. Whitburn's team, for example, brought together the Community Council with the local Community Development Trust, Community Education Centre (voluntary management committee) and Whitburn Traders Group working in partnership with West Lothian Council's regeneration manager. The 'Whitburn Together' brand they created as a result of the Twin Towns programme features in all their work and is at the heart of their developing website.

However, other community-based organisations participating in the programme and attempting similar partnership brokering with parish or borough councils and their elected representatives encountered more resistance. In several towns, there was a perception that the 'voice of the town' should only be heard through the democratic structures in place, with even 'Town teams' struggling due to a territorial approach by the individual stakeholders involved. In one town, a lack of engagement with the town's project appeared to be due to its low priority in local regeneration plans (there was no development plan for the participating town, nor any plans to implement one).

Making unusual friends

If you were to have asked each town how it perceived its 'matched' pairing at the outset, an answer of anything from 'unlikely' to 'bemusing' would undoubtedly have been the response, largely due to the geographical distance and distinctive economies of the participants. However, exploration of data, exchange visits and semi-structured reflections on what had been learnt for each participant did lead to the identification of common challenges and most often a realisation of what their places held in common.

'At first, the twinning (of Merthyr Tydfil and North Shields) seemed an unusual partnership, but following discussion and analysis of data, both towns had very similar features, which helped us learn from each other.'

Miles Walton, Chair, North Shields Chamber of Trade and Commerce.

Developing a “plus funding” model of support

Trusts and foundations sometimes refer to their model as “funding plus” - with grants supplemented by other support activities. Our model is better described as “plus funding” with significant time, additional resources and effort spent on support through the Carnegie Associate and other activity.

As a two-phase programme, the first phase (January – September 2017) focused on relationship building and understanding. With a budget of £7,500 per twinning (largely dedicated to facilitating exchange visits), each pairing was tasked with identifying shared themes and projects for practical action with peer advice exchange. Geography (the distance between each twin) did prove a practical barrier in developing meaningful relationships in the first phase, as did the varying degrees of capacity of largely volunteer teams with often full-time employment. As a result, three of the five original pairings felt that they shared enough in common and could resource (largely through social capital) their participation adequately to draw up an action plan which would be delivered with mutual support over the phase two 11-month period. A budget of £15,000 was provided, shared between each partnership to deliver projects where collaboration and shared learning could most usefully take place. Plans were uniformly ambitious in terms of volunteer or employed officer capacity, and the Expert Reference Group encouraged the towns to simplify their plans and focus on two or three deliverables over the timeframe.

Five of the six participating towns were able to match and draw in additional sources of funds for their activities, due to the initial twinning funding provided by the Trust. Whilst some funds were used for the purchase of goods such as equipment and marketing, the majority was dedicated to the purchase of expert services such as consultancy on the future of a street market (Merthyr Tydfil), website design and introducing a social media presence (Broughshane, Whitburn, North Shields) or support for the development of digital marketing strategies.

Carnegie UK Trust support for the towns participating in the programme was provided through a part-time Associate Project Manager who provided ongoing liaison, guidance and advice between all the towns, supporting individual project leads and twin town ‘project teams’ in their development journey and facilitating reflection through guidance notes and workshops, drawing out themes and encouraging the identification of common areas for co-operation. Liaison at borough or county council level also took place in order to encourage engagement with the work of the twinning and alignment with local planning priorities and developments. Where this was secured the reach and impacts of the project were, unsurprisingly, more keenly felt.

An initial focus on ‘increasing footfall’ for most twins might have concentrated exclusively on physical improvements or visitor events-based activity, neglecting the use of digital communications as a key tool for promoting place-based identity to the wider world. To stimulate development in this area, the Trust provided strategic input at its collective Twin Town Gathering event in November 2017 to encourage towns to consider their digital footprint as part of their town promotional activity.

‘In Wooler, the initial emphasis of our action plan was on enhancing the physical gateways to the town. However, the support event held by the Trust in Manchester brought home to our team just how important “digital gateways” are to our town and as a result of that seminar – and with guidance from the Broughshane team – a radical overhaul of the Wooler website is underway and social media training instigated.’

Tom Johnston, Chief Executive, Glendale Community Development Trust

To support what became a key development action for all three twins in Phase Two, the Trust also subsequently commissioned and delivered a successful series of bespoke social media webinars for town representatives, a total of 25 people joining over the three sessions.

3. Programme benefits and impact

Learning through relationships (phase one)

‘Meeting you – finding out about ourselves.’

Lexie Scott, Broughshane and District Community Association

When we develop a new relationship, we invariably, if unconsciously, learn as much about ourselves as we do about the other person we are getting to know. We also feel less alone as that relationship and the trust underpinning it, is built. These were key impacts for the all towns developing their twinning relationship in the first phase of the Twin Towns UK programme, particularly where there was time invested in the process. The experience of the exchange visits, where a wealth of information and ideas were exchanged, was described as being akin to ‘holding up a mirror to ourselves’ and reflecting on their respective places and how their organisations went about achieving change in a new way.

The impact of these first months, was seen most obviously in the shifting perspectives of the most open participants, characterised by:

- A sense of common challenges facing all towns; for example, high street bank closures affected almost all participating towns. Potentially demotivating, these shared experiences in fact brought about a reduced sense of isolation for each town (‘we are not alone in facing this’).
- Recognising the importance of existing assets – both physical and social – that belong to each town (whether currently owned by the community or not), sometimes for the first time.

- Changing attitudes towards co-operation within each town and how to go about this.
- A renewed sense of purpose and energy for the community organisations participating.

‘(This work and) understanding of our towns will continue after the Twin Towns Project with both towns doing things differently and better.’

Antonia Pompa, Big Heart of Merthyr Tydfil Business Improvement District and North Shields Chamber of Trade and Commerce (final report).

Whilst the level of peer advice and ideas exchange varied between twins during Phase Two of the programme, all three pairings reported how over the 18 months the strengthening of their relationships enabled more honest and open discussion about strengths and weaknesses, which they hoped to continue to nurture beyond the period of the Trust’s funded programme.

For example, Wooler (Glendale CDT) was profoundly impressed and learnt much about the importance of and approach to community cohesion as an objective in its own right from the experiences and example of their twin, Broughshane. The small Northern Irish town’s Community Association has, over the last 40 years, deliberately sought to utilise community development as a way of achieving cohesion and a new post-Troubles identity for the town in an impactful way. Conversely, Broughshane’s team learned from Wooler’s experience in managing a suite of successful sustainable town projects and initiatives in a business-led and purposeful way. Learning was only made possible through development of relationships as ‘critical friends’ which the participants recognised as developing once the programme had progressed beyond the first year and regular communication established.

Practical activities (phase two)

During Phase Two, the focus on projects was to boost economic activity, increasing footfall to town centres, re-purposing disused buildings and increasing the attractiveness of towns for the benefit of visitors and new residents. However, these practical outputs outlined in each twins' action plan delivered unanticipated benefits far beyond the initial focus on economy.

Improving towns as a visitor destination (3 towns) and for the benefit of old and new residents (5 towns)

'Patrick's Pedal': Cycling route and activities



In Northern Ireland, Broughshane wanted to focus on its tourism offer as a small town situated at the foot of Slemish Mountain (St Patrick). To facilitate this aim, the project team focused on the **creation of cycling routes, a 'Patrick's Pedal' cycling festival** for both regional cycling clubs and family-oriented activities. Their twin, Wooler, was able to support this process of development having a well-established 'Wooler Wheel' cycling festival with established routes.

- Physical improvements to enhance the quality of place and 'liveability' were the focus for Wooler, Oswaldtwistle and Whitburn who each established new community-led planting schemes. This was coupled with instigating community-led town centre cleans (two for the first time).
- Quayside and new tourism markets: North Shields developed a brand-new website for its quayside to encourage use of this regenerated area and to capitalise on cruise traffic. The town took advice from the experience of the small seaside town of Fishguard and Goodwick for their cruise liner dialogue, where a well-developed relationship had already been built by its Chamber of Trade and Commerce.
- Community ownership of Oswaldtwistle's recently closed public library through creating

a campaign-led friends group; a change of council leadership led to the resource being re-opened but the friends group continues to fundraise and explore imaginative ways to utilise the library space.

- Community re-purposing assets: the Whitburn team repurposed both a former small Council building as a community resource for small enterprises and community groups to meet, and a derelict phone box to become a community defibrillator station, delivering training in its use throughout the town.
- Heritage Trails were developed, involving new community groups for the first time in town leadership, in both Wooler and Merthyr Tydfil impacting on both community cohesion and visitor activities.

The digital footprint of towns – all towns

Recognising the importance of digital gateways to both the towns' visitor offers and as a tool for stimulating community participation and cohesion became a theme for all six towns in Phase Two, following a facilitated 'Gathering' event at the beginning of Phase Two of the project which focused on the 'digital gateways' theme and reviewed existing digital activity in each town. This resulted in new or updated websites for all six towns, and the commissioning and creation of the first social media strategies for three towns, which promoted community events, facilities and volunteering opportunities, marketed local businesses and festivals and enhanced the '*telling of the town's stories*' through new media.

Markets as a source of income and sustainability

Street, artisan and farmers markets were all areas explored by four of the participating towns. In Merthyr Tydfil the Business Improvement District brought partners together to commission an independent review of its regular town centre markets to develop a new blueprint for the town. At the same time, the town trialled the development of new 'sector' specific artisan markets such as their first Vegan Market, promoted through social media, which increased shopping centre footfall by 20%. In the smaller towns of Whitburn and Oswaldtwistle, farmer and artisan markets were trialled for the first time.

Whitburn's story: town markets



Whitburn Town Traders organised their first artisan/ farmers market in November 2017. The response from both business and community participants was resoundingly positive, with quarterly roll-out of the markets agreed by the project team. Comments received included:

'We enjoyed the event and would certainly come back again perhaps quarterly?'

Good Life Farming

'Anything that promotes local business and sense of community can only be a good thing.'

Need Cake

'I had five or six comments about Whitburn needing this sort of thing.'

Lothian Latte

As a group entirely run by volunteers, the challenge for Whitburn with all its initiatives will be to develop and identify community capacity and possible paid roles for sustaining these new developments.



4. Emerging themes

The experiences of towns participating in the programme and the policy themes which emerged, echo international towns' policy consensus on the importance of four key pillars⁸:

- A unique sense of identity and place
- Economy
- Leadership and Citizenship
- Environment

World Towns Framework 4 pillars 2017

Initial practical projects tended to focus on two of these themes: **Economy** (interpreted as boosting footfall) and **Environment** (physical projects to improve liveability). The development of these practical activities led to recognition of the importance of the **further two pillars** outlined in the *World Towns Framework*.

Building unique identity and sense of place

For some of the community organisations involved, the realisation that practical projects could positively impact on the engagement of new parts of their community for the first time in their town's future, was perceived as an unexpected and key benefit to project delivery.

'How quickly a seed can grow. One walk developed as part of TTUK has grown into eight walks and a book using many different groups' input for the first time.'

Lynne Pringle, Neighbourhood Plan Chair, Wooler.

An example of this is the development of heritage trails and walking tours in two towns (Merthyr Tydfil and Wooler) which arose as a result of learning across the twins. Through involving and delegating delivery to historical or walking groups, a new source

of social capital was identified, with tangible benefits for those participating in understanding their place, telling its 'unique story', increasing civic pride and motivation to engage in town futures.

Merthyr's story: 'Merthyr Miles' Town Centre Walks

Inspired by North Shields existing heritage trail, the Merthyr project team devised a series of 'Merthyr Miles' guided (and self-guided) walks of their town. During the project timeframe, six of 10 proposed themed trails were published, each launched with a guided walk by the compiler of the trail, with the next two to follow in September and October 2018. The process of developing each trail involved the borough council, local visitor attractions, four local heritage/historical societies and the business improvement district together to explore their place identity. The trails, designed, published and available on the We Love Merthyr website included:

- A Petticoat Trail through Merthyr Tydfil: March 2018 (launched on International Women's Day). Approximately 35 attended the first guided walk
- A Vision Trail through Merthyr Tydfil
- In the Footsteps of Dic Penderyn: May 2018 (to coincide with the anniversary of the 1831 Merthyr Rising).
- Off the Rails ~ Rail, Steam & Speed: June 2018.
- Look Up in Merthyr ~ A Trail through Architecture
- Merthyr Tydfil at Play ~ A Sporting Trail.

Each walk is available in both English and Welsh and is downloadable from the We Love Merthyr website as well as being available as a printed version from 'Redhouse', the local town centre community managed facility.

Another twinning (Oswaldtwistle and Whitburn) held a series of community led town clean-ups which elicited high levels of community engagement for new sectors of the community and increased motivation to improve 'their town' from all ages,

⁸ *World Towns Framework: a call to action* (13 December 2017), Journal of Place Management and Development, 10 (5).

including involvement from High School students who 'adopted' areas to tidy up and enhance their appearance, and individuals experiencing isolation who were able to participate in a community activity for the first time.

Leadership and citizenship

Leadership and citizenship were the second of the more unexpected themes evidenced through the programme, brought about through its collaborative approach to encouraging wider grassroots community engagement. Deliberately designed to reach beyond the usual network of agencies involved with economic and social regeneration, the project engaged with and nurtured local leaders and leadership potential through focusing on local ideas, connections and resources.

Where a project team of individuals had come together specifically for the purpose of the Twin Towns UK programme, for the first time, new community leaders emerged from within the group as the project progressed and confidence was built amongst participants. One of our twins, Oswaldtwistle and Whitburn, found new participants drawn from the community getting involved, for example, a new pub landlord turning around the reputation of a local public house in the town for the benefit of the wider community – and through engagement in community activities – becoming an authoritative voice on behalf of town businesses. Alongside more seasoned community activists, over the period of the programme these community actors grew their own understanding of opportunities and challenges faced by their towns and developed leadership skills. Tempering these positive developments, is a need to acknowledge the finite community capacity of a solely volunteer workforce, within towns, to deliver their increasing ambitions. In one town, North Shields, it was possible to utilise some of the Twin Towns resource to 'commission' an established member of the project team with a strong leadership voice, to take forward some of the initiatives.

A sense of increased **community empowerment** was clearly evident in participating organisations for whom participating and delivering specific 'place based' projects were relatively new experiences. The experience was reported as

developing confidence in areas such as winning funding, engaging with a UK-wide respected place-making charitable trust, building an evidence base and learning more about how to measure change. A more outward-looking attitude to problem solving was reported, through a new sense of perspective gained in partnership with their twin.

Oswaldtwistle's story: active citizenship



Oswaldtwistle was led by a civic arts trust, already fully engaged in community development activity through the arts. As their project team progressed through the programme and saw the impact of its twin's community events, the need to 'go back to basics' in bringing residents and community groups together to participate and act to improve their town became apparent. However, instead of focusing on the negative challenges, their campaign took a strength-based approach, creating a community website, and significantly, holding the first of several 'Big Positive' meetings to inform residents, businesses and voluntary groups of all the activities already taking place in the town and enable partnership building.

Coupled with the reputational benefits of participating in a project commissioned by a respected charitable 'brand', Carnegie UK Trust, came the increased sense of a **'right to a voice'** in planning and policy for their towns' futures. For Whitburn, the successful delivery of their initiatives helped build further trust from those tasked with delivery at local authority level; for example, the community organisations' evident ability to deliver successful projects resulted in securing further funding to lead on the development of derelict land in the town centre.

5. Learning for town policy makers, funders and practitioners

The experiences of the towns participating in the Twin Towns UK programme have demonstrated several benefits of utilising a domestic twinning approach to boost town capacity and socio-economic wellbeing. The lessons for town and place-based policymakers, funders and practitioners might be summarised as follows.

An approach to collaboration and co-operation across the UK

As Brexit impacts disproportionately on towns, there has never been a greater need for the use of collaborative and co-operative programmes at grass roots level between towns across the UK. The Twin Towns UK programme suggests benefits of small-town twinning that are relevant to the current context: attracting visitors from within the UK (tourism), brokering greater understanding and opportunities for trading products and services, and fostering tolerance and greater inter-cultural understanding. The Centre for Cross Border Studies is currently pursuing its 'Towards a New Common Chapter' programme including North/South and East/West relations. Its rationale states that:

'We are conscious of the need for such cooperation to be independently valued and enacted at the grass-roots level, with communities setting their own priorities and advocating for their inclusion in regional and local strategies.'

The value of place-based funding, expressed through twinning

The programme's place-based, non-prescriptive approach demonstrated the value of enabling town community group representatives to

set their own agenda, begin and continue their 'journey of understanding'. As a recent symposium of Welsh stakeholders⁹ reported:

'Every place is different. The problem is that funding structures measure by what they think is important, cutting across the ability to have a coherent place-specific plan.'

Roundtable participant, Merthyr Tydfil

Enabling grassroots groups to establish their own priorities, through a process of self-reflection and co-operation with another town, might mean that micro-issues are the starting point rather than strategic planning, but results in the development of leadership, capacity and confidence of community groups. Starting with 'where the community is' rather than where planners and policymakers think it should be focusing its attention might take time, but can create energy, ownership and a problem-solving approach to 'whole town' and not just high street issues, which is capable of developing new community leaders for shaping town futures.

Successful learning can be achieved through brokering unusual friendships

The relationships built across the countries of the UK as a result of Twin Town UK, were not those that the participating towns originally envisaged, either in terms of geography or interest areas. However, the programme highlighted that there was real value in putting together 'unusual friends', through the use of place-based data and witnessing what developed.

⁹ Supporting local places and local people: opportunities and challenges for Welsh towns, p14 (2017), Menzies, R; Carnegie UK Trust



Whilst geography was initially a practical barrier to effective relationship development, and needs to be adequately resourced, the difficulties this created were arguably outweighed by the benefits of finding common data characteristics in vastly diverse town communities across the UK, set within the context of distinct democratic, planning and policy structures. Had the process been self-selecting much of this learning might have been lost, particularly through lacking the 'open' and 'outward-looking' approach encouraged in the development process. A programme which had favoured towns' natural desire to identify partnerships with which they already had common ground would have missed much of the rich learning experiences and re-visioning that took place.

At the same time, the programme evidenced that where the *capacity* of the towns within their respective pairings was matched alongside their *organisational characteristics* a great deal more could be achieved within the timeframe. For example, an established community association and a community development trust were able to engage in dialogue from the same starting position, whilst a business-focused BID and Chamber of Trade share a high level mission.

The power of the small

The programme highlights clearly the power of modest projects and funding (a total of £22,500 per twinning – £11,250 per town – throughout the 18-month programme) to energise communities and generate practical outputs and social capital developments. Within the myriad of funding streams available to community organisations, the Twin Towns programme, facilitated through very little funding and direct support from the Project Manager, enabled town-based groups to create their own solutions to local challenges. Whilst too early to assess longer term outcomes for the communities involved, the practical outputs, indications of developing community leadership and plans expressed for future developments show clear benefits for the communities involved and future wider planning engagement.

‘Who speaks for towns?’: non-traditional leaders and grassroots approaches

This question was repeatedly posed as the Twin Towns initiative progressed, by the town project teams, their stakeholder and democratically elected partners and by Carnegie UK Trust itself. Whilst all our participant community organisations in some sense represented their town, none had a monopoly on this role, nor did they come from traditional local authority-led routes (although several local authorities encouraged and supported involvement). There is no doubt that the tensions and challenges of working and co-operating with numerous organisations and structures which all believe that they have a legitimate voice, was a key inhibitor to progress for towns participating in both stages of the programme. ‘Bottom up’/ grassroots approaches for towns are complicated and messy, precisely because they must involve so many different interests. They are crucial, however, in establishing what matters to people about their places and in finding the solutions for ‘towns in crisis’. Where cross-sectoral partnership was strongest, such as in North Shields where North Tyneside Council supports an innovative ‘Sector Connector’ mentoring programme between business and the third sector, the local authority acts as an enabler and facilitator (through information, advice, support) in realising town community aspirations, rather than a constraint.

Building town leadership capacity and the qualities that are needed

If communities are to assert their voices on behalf of their towns, what are the qualities that funders and policy makers should be seeking to nurture in building leadership capacity? Whilst the expected leadership traits of inspiring motivated teams, applying tacit community knowledge and networks, and communication skills are to be expected, the Twin Towns project most significantly highlighted that the most effective existing and emerging community leaders demonstrated the *ability to collaborate, nurture cohesion and co-operation* amongst peer groups and break through conflict through seeking shared solutions. As a key barrier to progress in communities struggling with inter-organisational politics, several participants highlighted the need for further support to develop these skills areas if real and lasting progress was to be made in securing their towns’ futures.



6. Conclusion

The wide definition of towns adopted for the Twin Towns programme engaged towns with radically different demographics and contextual circumstances from across the four jurisdictions of the UK. It is notable that all communities were engaged with similar issues but needed to identify and deliver their own unique place-based solutions to these challenges.

The success and relevancy of the learning gained by the six final participating towns is borne out by their request, at the final collaborative event in Autumn 2018, for Carnegie UK Trust to continue to support their learning network, facilitating further strengthening of the 'honest' and reflective relationships brokered.

'The TTUK project has allowed both sets of core groups to get to know each other and to begin to build relationships. There has been a good synergy between the people involved and it is hoped that this can be further developed. It is hoped that further funding opportunities might be identified that would allow this to continue and provide opportunities to include more people.'

Glendale Community Development Trust and Broughshane and District Community Association

Most participating towns came to the programme focused initially on the economic challenges of footfall and the High Street. However, participants' initial focus soon broadened into much wider interest in recognising the importance of re-engaging with and strengthening their own unique place identity as a starting point, building leadership and leader capacity and finding a voice at local and regional level for place-based grass-roots approaches. The non-prescriptive development process of the Twin Towns programme appears to have been able to facilitate, in a self-directed way, this recognition of a 'whole town community approach'.

*'If your question is about saving the high street, then you're asking the wrong question. High streets are reflections of towns and it is towns that are in crisis, not just high street retail. We need to save our towns and the high streets will survive as a consequence.'*¹⁰

¹⁰ Sparks, L. (2018, November 5). Destination High Street – Restoring Vibrancy to Scotland's Towns (blog comment) retrieved from <https://stirlingretail.co.uk>.



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. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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