



Talk of the Town:

Supporting place-based storytelling

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, communities across the UK have demonstrated who they are, and what they stand for. Extraordinary acts of kindness, compassion and connection in our communities - from wellbeing checks on the elderly and vulnerable to WhatsApp groups for essential supplies for neighbours - have prevailed during this challenging and unprecedented time. On a larger scale and more formal footing, towns (see, for example, Falkirk Council 2020) and cities (see, for example, Derry Now 2020) across the UK have established Community Action Funds to support citizens affected by COVID-19. However, despite being transformational for how we currently live our lives, this is just one moment in the history of our communities which are steeped in history, values and unique stories.

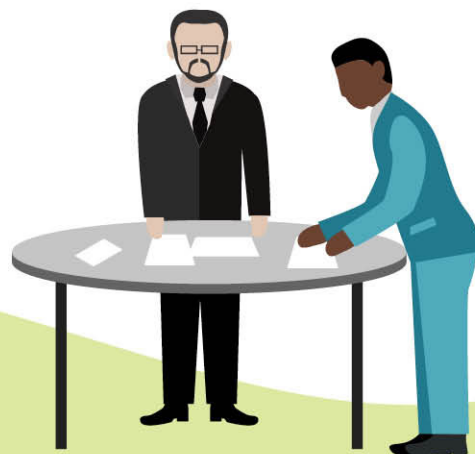
Across the UK, two in five people self-identify as living in a town (Wallace and Thurman 2018), yet despite their collective demographic weight, towns have traditionally struggled for attention in public policy terms. Rarely taken as the geographical basis for formal policymaking and with no well-resourced organisation advocating on their behalf, they have been doubly disadvantaged when governments across the UK have historically sought to improve place-based outcomes (Pennycook 2017). Recent government interventions to support towns to have a sustainable future, while welcome attempts to address regional inequalities, have perpetuated the national policy narrative of towns as 'struggling'; facing 'significant challenges'; and in danger of being 'left-behind' (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2019). However, this is in direct contrast to how citizens feel, and talk, about their towns, which provide them with a unique sense of place, identity and shared history (The British Academy 2017). Instead of a narrative of frustration, decline and stagnation, communities often speak of their town's achievements, strengths and potential - and take pride in their place.

This report provides a brief overview of the recent use of storytelling as a methodology in policymaking, and how this can be applied at the local level to engage, inspire and facilitate place-based change. The aims, process and outcomes of the Carnegie UK Trust's project, Talk of the Town, are explained, and an overview is provided of the reflections from supporting the two towns of Scarborough and Treorchy with storytelling expertise. The report aims to provide learning for policymakers, practitioners and funders who wish to explore the concept of storytelling as a tool to improve community wellbeing through improved community engagement, cohesion and agency. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in storytelling projects to capture communities' experiences in a crisis, and we believe this to be a timely opportunity to reflect on what we have learnt in supporting communities to tell their story.

Storytelling in policymaking

Storytelling, or building a narrative, can be defined as developing ‘a sequence of events, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole’ (Lowdnes 2016). Storytelling in policy, as in literature, consists of a collection of stories, or characters, bound by common experience, in a plot leading towards a resolution (Davidson 2016). As with all the best stories, the characters have agency - they lead the plot towards a successful conclusion (Casasbuenas 2019). Put simply, ‘[s]tories make, prop up, and bring down systems. Stories shape how we understand the world, our place in it, and our ability to change it’ (Saltmarshe 2018).

Governments across the UK are exploring the use of narratives to tell the story of how they are working to improve citizens’ wellbeing, and to secure legitimacy and support for their policies (Callahan 2013). From providing context to open data (Eggers 2018), to complementing the data in national performance frameworks (Jacobs 2020), policymakers are increasingly seeking to add value and meaning to statistics which fail to capture the complexities of people’s lives. Narratives are now being explored so that statistics are no longer people with the tears wiped away.



To date, the exploration of storytelling at the local level has focused on the corporate communications of local government - of establishing the narrative of who councils are and what they seek to achieve (Local Government Association 2020). Storytelling is increasingly recognised as a leadership skill for local government managers, and a tool for dismantling departmental siloes with a shared sense of purpose (Bennett and Orr 2019). Developing a corporate narrative can help to brand, market and promote towns and cities in order to attract investment and support tourism (Collins 2012).

While local government considering how to communicate effectively with its citizens is welcome, the Carnegie UK Trust is interested in the separate issue of storytelling led by the community, as one component in a theory of change for improving place-based outcomes. Our understanding of storytelling led by local people is that it has the power to explain, unite and progress places. The story of a place can be a statement of its values, for example, of being a Fair Trade Town (Fair Trade Foundation 2020), or what it aspires to be, such as a Living Wage Town (Living Wage Foundation 2020) or a kinder place (Kinder Leeds 2020). Collective stories of the community have the ability to bring citizens together, to inspire, and to facilitate conversations which bring about change. They enable people to support each other, find common ground or a shared vision, and in turn, help a place to thrive.

With a mission to improve the wellbeing of people across the UK and Ireland and as one of the largest foundations in the UK to be based in a town, the Trust seeks to play a leading role in supporting the development of towns' policy and innovative practice in our towns. The Trust's international research (Kelly 2016) on case studies of towns that had transformed their fortunes found that a clear narrative was an important part of their success. All of the towns featured in the research had a sense of purpose and understanding of their history, which translated into a clear story about the town that

local residents bought into, and was visible to external visitors. The stories of the places were the real, lived experiences of people there, and were built upon until they became an integral part of the local narrative. These stories developed into what the town is 'known for', and what future it aspires to.



Talk of the Town

In order to explore how the concept of storytelling can be used to develop flourishing towns in the UK, the Carnegie UK Trust's Talk of the Town project offered professional support to citizens across England and Wales to plan, articulate and present the story of their town. Support was offered in the form of professional storytelling training from Sounddelivery and Lucidity, and applicants were asked to submit a short application form and a video outlining their future vision for their town.

We were looking for enthusiasm and passion for the town; evidence that applicants had considered how the story could be used for setting the vision for the town or its development; and evidence of co-ordinating with other local groups interested in progressing the town and telling its story. The project was time-limited and was an initial exploration into the methodology of storytelling and its use at a town-level.



The project generated extensive interest, with applications received from 29 towns across England and Wales. What was clear was that a number of towns are currently on this journey - some are at the beginning of discussions about where their town has come from; where is it now; and what it aspires to be. Others are relatively far into this journey, and are focussing on their unique assets and offer which bring citizens, communities, and different sectors together to explain who they are to visitors and to the outside world.

After careful reflection by an internal panel at the Carnegie UK Trust, we decided to support Scarborough and Treorchy as part of our project. The applications were for two very different towns at two different stages of the journey of developing their story. Supported together, they could generate extensive learning for two different types of towns - large coastal towns in the North of England, and small towns in the Welsh Valleys - and with different sectors and communities at the forefront of the ambitions to develop their towns through storytelling.

The support provided to the citizens of the two towns was co-produced, and reflected both the stage of journey they were at in developing their story and the aspirations of the teams to use the story in the future vision of the towns. In the case of both towns, the support involved training in crafting the story with a core team, and an event involving a larger group of key stakeholders and decision-makers to communicate the story and to seek a commitment to consider how it could be used effectively in their respective organisations.

Scarborough

With a population of 108,700 (Office for National Statistics 2018), Scarborough is a large town located on the North Sea coast of North Yorkshire. One of England's most famous coastal towns, Scarborough has a strong tourism economy, but also vibrant independent business and creative arts sectors; an evolving community and voluntary sector; and a strong sense of place held by residents.



Talk of the Town event, Scarborough

The application for Scarborough to take part in the Talk of the Town project was led by Coast and Vale Community Action, a social enterprise which promotes resilient and confident communities supported by a thriving and enterprising third sector. Through the project, Coast and Vale Community Action (CaVCA) sought to co-ordinate with the National Lottery Community Fund supported project Totally Socially and a local social history project (From Scardeburg To Scarborough 2020), and their complementary aims of listening to communities and recording their stories. CaVCA also run a regular Ideas Club which provides residents with the opportunity to discuss common challenges and possible solutions; contributes to the local authority's plans to regenerate the town centre; and supports local artists, parents groups, gardening and food growing projects, and local independent traders. The social enterprise seeks to tell the stories of these groups across digital platforms, and was interested in learning how to do this more effectively.

The challenges experienced in Scarborough reported by the project team are those commonly associated with former industrial towns and with coastal communities. The story of the town's challenges includes a lack of well-paid, skilled employment opportunities, compounded by a seasonal labour market; historic under investment; and poor transport and wider infrastructure. The team also identified generational challenges in the town, with an ageing population; some demographics suffering from loneliness and isolation; and a younger generation that tends to leave the town to seek opportunity. These challenges, in turn, contribute to associated challenges to individual, community and societal wellbeing; a lack of agency; and a sense of not being listened to by decision-makers.

The training provided by the Talk of the Town project supported individuals to tell their stories in their own words and using methods that they were comfortable with. Storytelling was used as a tool to build a picture of a town full of stories which contribute to the larger-scale story of community life and the town. This enabled the group to create a tapestry of local stories making up one overall story about the richness and diversity of Scarborough's communities, and their commitment to listen to each other. Scarborough would be a listening town.

At the final project event with cross-sectoral stakeholders and decision-makers, attendees were asked to commit to listening to citizens, service users, and communities as part of their core ways of working. This manifested in a 'human library' from which attendees could 'borrow' individuals to learn from their wide-ranging personal stories, and begin to assemble an appreciation of the experiences of Scarborough's citizens and communities. The ambition for the commitment to listen was that decision-makers could learn about what citizens and communities needed, in order to improve their lives.

Treorchy

Treorchy is classed as a small town (population 7,694) in the Rhondda Valley of Wales (Understanding Welsh Places 2020). Treorchy applied to the Talk of the Town project because of a desire to tell people about all the good things happening there. The Talk of the Town story of Treorchy (O'Neill 2020) was told by the Chamber of Commerce, self-employed artists, council employees, schoolchildren, and high street businesses.



Talk of the Town workshop, Treorchy

Treorchy started as a small town in rural Wales, where most people were farmers or connected to the land. In the middle of the nineteenth century coal was discovered, and overnight the population of the town exploded. The 'Black Gold' brought people from across the UK and Ireland who were looking for work, as well as people from within Wales, including Welsh speakers. People in the town bonded together through the hardships of mining, and its official organisations, the unions and the workers clubs. They met and supported each other through the pubs on every street corner, the chapels, the choirs and the rugby clubs. The competition between clubs, neighbourhoods and towns could be fierce.

When the mines were dismantled, people left the area. Others went to work in factories built with the need for new employment in the area, but those are closed now too. The town became categorised as one of the 'post-industrial' areas of Britain, facing economic and social

challenges when the UK changed to a service economy.

Treorchy may have a smaller population than fifty years ago, but its high street is full of independent shops and businesses. Treorchy has been quietly building on its past legacy as an interdependent community. It has been creating a VisitTreorchy brand, running events like the Christmas parade and the first Rhondda Pride and promoting its outdoors and heritage. In 2019, it won The Great British High Street award, celebrating the strong links between community and the high street.

Treorchy's story is not over. The local Talk of the Town project team asked for residents to get involved in writing their future. Angharad Lee, Sion Thomas Owen and Adrian Emmett told the story of the town past and future at the Talk of the Town event (FFILM Productions, 2020) and people from all parts of the community came along. People in Treorchy believe their town is a good place to live and work. The Talk of the Town project helped Treorchy to embrace its past whilst focussing on the future. Talk of the Town is a springboard for the future, with people together committing to telling their story, promote their place, their landscape and art.

As Adrian Emmett, the entrepreneur who led the Talk of the Town project, said, '*Individually we were doing well, but as soon as we came together we became the best town in Britain*'.

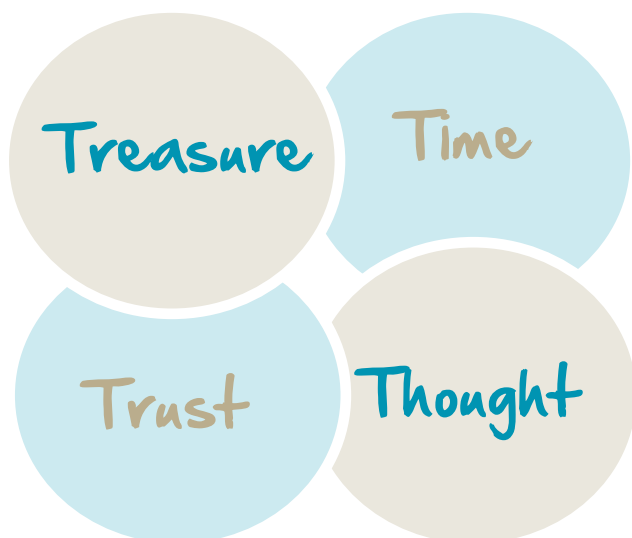


Talk of the Town event, Treorchy
Image courtesy of FFILM Productions

Reflections

In order to explore the concept of storytelling in towns, and to generate insight and thought-leadership for policymakers, practitioners and funders across the UK and Ireland, our approach to the Talk of the Town project was developed on time, thought, treasure and trust.

To maximise the learning from our Talk of the Town project, we compiled our reflections, in addition to those of the storytelling experts who supported the communities, and the individuals of the core groups in each town, to develop our findings on supporting place-based storytelling. All parties were asked to reflect on what had gone well; what challenges remain; and what lessons could be useful for those considering supporting storytelling in communities.



Treasure

Bringing people together in order to explore and develop the story of their place requires a **small pot of funding, or provision of direct support**. All of the members of the groups leading the development of the storytelling projects in Scarborough and Treorchy had demanding day jobs, for which the story of place was important, but not a core part of their work. Funding was required to enable individuals to take time outwith the delivery function of their own organisation, and to host or take part in training and progress the project, at no additional cost to themselves. The nature of the expenses common across the two groups included meeting space, catering, and event costs, while other costs reflected the stage of the journey the two groups were at, for example, for paying the expenses of those taking part in the 'human library' in Scarborough, or for creative outputs in Treorchy.

The provision of expert storytelling support from outwith the respective towns was also considered important, in terms of **expertise and independent facilitation**. The professional support provided was bespoke to both groups, and flexible across the stages of the project, from critical friend to listen to and challenge the story, to impartial curator to identify commonalities in the stories of individuals to create a more cohesive, community narrative. With the groups focusing on the story, those contracted to deliver the storytelling support could focus on how to present this, to whom, and to challenge the groups to refine their stories, and their aims. Both groups believed that someone part of the community itself could not provide such impartiality and challenge.

The small-scale support provided by the Trust was designed to bring the communities together to develop and present the story of the towns. **Further funding would be required to embed the stories** as part of the future vision of the towns in plans for their development. Securing the longevity and the use of the story would involve integration with plans and strategies designed to improve place-based outcomes, such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs); the development of Towns Deals; and the funding streams within the respective towns. Only by communities having access to funding across a number of stages of storytelling, from developing a narrative to its use, will policymakers have a better understanding of the importance of the unique stories of places, and will support using them to inform their strategic direction.

Time

Utilising **opportunities or occasions where the community is already coming together effectively** can prove valuable. For example, during the timescales for the project, key members of the community in Treorchy were working collectively as part of the bid to become the Great British High Street 2019, and were supporting each other in the aftermath of flooding as a result of Storm Dennis. Such occasions of community cohesion are important opportunities and networks to build and draw upon, as they often embody the story of a place, and its aspirations.

As with wider forms of community development, supporting storytelling in towns is a **long-term, iterative process**. A range of members of the



community must be supported and empowered to tell their own stories and different groups across the sectors need to be engaged before a community narrative can be developed. When more extensive engagement is required, more intensive support is needed and a longer lead in time is necessary before the story of the town can be developed.

Although in different sectors, the groups leading the projects in both Scarborough and Treorchy were well-placed at the centre of their communities, and had pre-existing relationships and networks with key stakeholders which made a relatively short timescale for the Talk of the Town project possible. Policymakers and funders interested in supporting place-based storytelling without such organisations and individuals as part of their core group will necessarily have to take a longer-term approach.

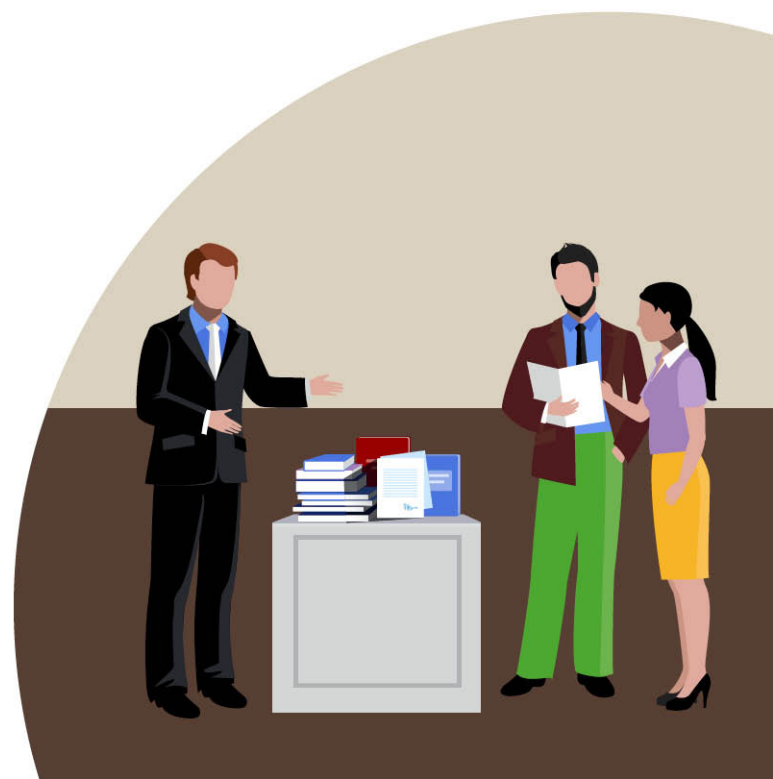
Trust

Trust and good relationships are key to ensuring wide-ranging and effective participation in crafting a place-based narrative. Honesty, an opportunity to be heard, and a willingness to listen engenders trust between those leading the project and the wider citizens they seek to engage with. Transparency about how their views will be taken into account, and open communication channels that facilitate feedback, provide residents with the confidence to take part in a project of such public and long-term importance. A relational approach between the funder and community is also important, with a commitment to flexibility and a willingness to co-produce the project required by all parties, in order to secure the outcomes sought by all.

The use of **spaces that are considered to be safe, neutral and kind** is also important for facilitating trust and good working relationships. Scarborough Library and the Park and Dare Theatre in Treorchy, representations of knowledge, community, and empowerment, were used as venues for the final project events,

and sent important messages about the ways of working the groups had committed to during the project, and into the future.

The **capacity and convening power** of a small number of individuals within the core group to take ownership of developing the story is crucial. Clear roles and responsibilities, such as project management, community engagement, and communications, divided across a small number of individuals is required to progress the project from inception to completion. These individuals must also have convening power, on a personal level, as in Treorchy, or on an organisational basis, using its trusted brand and reputation, as in Scarborough, to bring people together and to establish clear aims, timescales and outputs to secure the participation of the community.



Thought

To ensure a **diversity of thought**, individuals and organisations from across public, private and voluntary sectors must be engaged in the development of a place-based story. The demography of a town, as well as its economic and social structures, must be represented in discussions, to ensure that it is recognised and supported by all who live and work there. The project participants in Scarborough and Treorchy highlighted the importance of engaging with the local authority; businesses; the community and voluntary sector; political representatives; and directly with citizens as residents and service users, to develop the story of their place. The use of the core group as a platform to secure more inclusive representation in the process was crucial. Such extensive engagement also provides the opportunity to collaborate with other initiatives in other sectors, which can reinforce the story; ensure its wider use; and secure shared ownership of the story, with leadership shared at different points on the journey.

The story of a place is the golden thread from its past experiences, its present reality, and its future aspirations. In order to acknowledge and learn from its past and to look to its future, it is important to take an **intergenerational approach** to developing the story. This ensures that the story does not live in the past; is not owned entirely by those in the present; and takes into account the needs and aspirations of future generations. In Treorchy, schoolchildren were engaged in the project from the outset, which ensured that the process remained future focused, and that the participants reflected on what the town must provide in the coming years in order to attract and retain future citizens.



Conclusion

As services, businesses, and community spaces close across the UK due to the COVID-19 pandemic, community wellbeing is being challenged like never before. However, towns and communities across the UK are more than the amenities they have to offer. They embody the story of who their citizens are, and what they aspire their place to be, in a process which has been accelerated at a time of local, national, and global emergency.

Although the national and regional policy narrative of towns across the UK has traditionally been negative, and one of decline, the stories of towns as told by the people who live and work there have proven to be asset-based; future focused; and aspirational. As recognition of the importance of storytelling in policy grows, the potential and power of communities leading on the development of a narrative for their place from the bottom up becomes more apparent.

The Trust's experience of supporting place-based storytelling in Scarborough and Treorchy has generated learning on supporting communities with time, thought, trust and treasure to come together to develop and tell their story. We hope that the reflections of all those involved in the project provide useful findings on the design and process of supporting community-led storytelling, for policymakers, practitioners, and funders interested in exploring the concept to improve place-based outcomes.

Building on this work, the Trust is now seeking to capture stories of community connectedness in places across the UK and Ireland, and of how community wellbeing develops and is challenged by the COVID-19 emergency. We are particularly interested in what these responses tell us about

the challenges that communities and places are facing; how groups and organisations are coming together and working with the local authority to address these; and what it is about the current context that has enabled these new or positive ways of working. The Trust will explore what these stories and experiences mean for the future of our local communities, as we seek to support places across the UK and Ireland to flourish. Please visit our website for more information on this new project: www.carnegieuktrust/blog/collaborating-for-community-and-societal-wellbeing/.



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