Rural Development and Social Renewal

Talk to the Northern Rural Network,

Newcastle University, 17 April 2012

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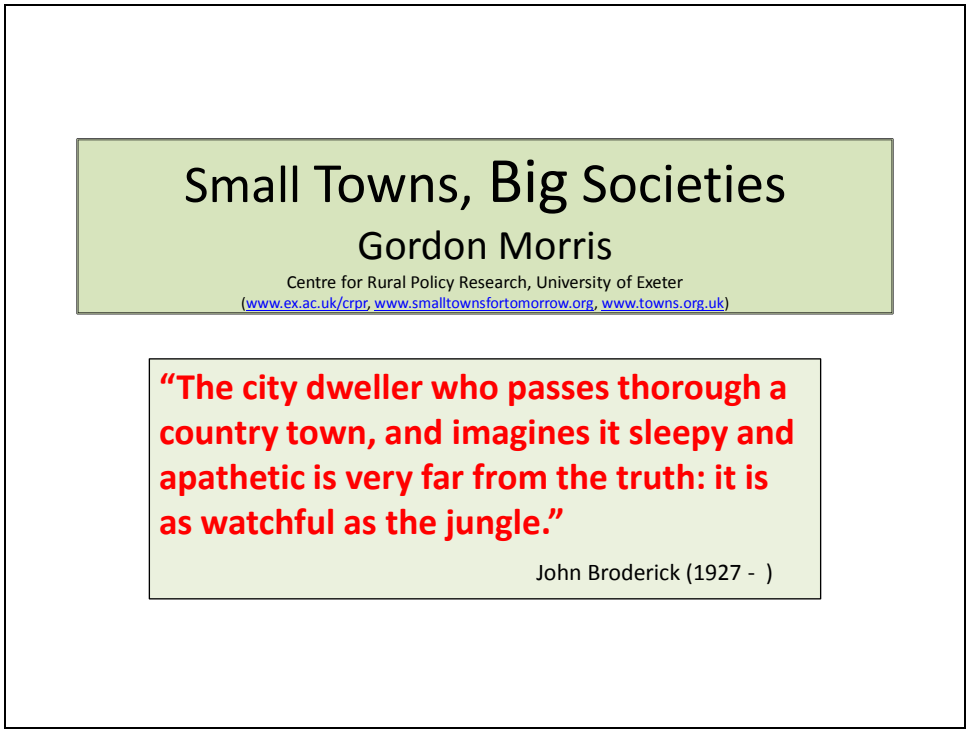


I have been asked to connect "rural development and social renewal" with the aim of rounding off the day with a – positive - look forward to those much longed-for sunlit uplands that those of us involved in rural development are convinced are always just around the corner. I will try to do this by talking about how interest in our small towns and related research and community-led development has grown in recent years, and how that has been a good thing. The

sunlight uplands that this growth implies will be somewhat clouded, however, by my personal concerns about a tailing-off of interest, coupled with what I believe to be the erosion of local government, irrespective of any government rhetoric to the contrary.

My talk, therefore, will be something of a mix of a canter through history, coupled with a look at how the growth in interest in towns came about, a brief description of some personal research into the Market Towns Initiative, and a personal view about local democracy.

If nothing else I hope to offer some thoughts and that, between us, we will manage to stimulate a bit of a debate.

I believe that our small towns have, as they have always had, a future, and a role to play in local wellbeing, democracy, and service provision. Any doubts I have stem from the trend towards centralization of, for example, education, and, despite the rhetoric about localism, matters relating to planning and local determination – although, to be fair, it's true that responsibility for public health will be returned to local

government and matters such as housing and roads still remain the responsibility of local government. I am, however, optimistic by nature, and have seen much in my work in, and with, and about, small towns, to encourage me in my belief that they have much to offer.

I know that here at the Institute for Social Renewal the aim is to help communities and societies overcome deep-seated problems associated with economic vitality, social harmony and the health and well-being of citizens that exist in this country. The disparities and inequalities are not equally spread geographically, as you will know better than most, nor are they shared equally within country towns themselves or between towns in the same county or region. It is a complicated picture, and one with which you are all, I am sure, either intuitively or professionally – or both! - well aware.

I believe, partly based on my research at the University of Exeter into the Market Towns Initiative, and earlier research at the University of Plymouth into the present-day roles of a small town, that our small towns are "big societies" – hence

the title of my talk. I also believe that the people who live in them and care about them are capable of managing their own affairs; of taking democratic responsibility in ways that were once the norm. In many places they are crying out for more of what governments of all persuasions try to convince us is central to their particular party's beliefs; beliefs expressed using a variety of words and phrases: devolution, double-devolution, local determination, local control, neighbourhoods, communities, localism, and, most recently, and confusing to some at least, "The Big Society". Less often used, however, when talking about any transfer of powers, are terms such as town, village, and parish councils, or, indeed, collective - electoral - local government in any form. We should bear in mind that democracy means power vested in the people – and that power, theoretically at least, should only be passed upwards when absolutely necessary.

Of course, it's not all gloom and doom. Years ago I gave a talk to the Royal Town Planning Institute in which I noted how the town I live near, Sherborne, in Dorset, had, according to various locals at various times, been declining for the best part of a thousand years.

For example, it declined in 909AD when the church divided the diocese before transferring it to Old Sarum in 1075 (and where's Old Sarum, now!).

Following this the town prospered and declined before becoming the most populous town in the county in the 14th century with a mix of rich and poor inhabitants (interestingly, according to the census, it still had the greatest extremes of wealth and poverty in Dorset in 2001).

Its market grants couldn't protect it from the Black Death in the 1340s, and so its population declined – rapidly – before heavy investment in the town restored its fortunes as a cloth making centre. When cloth making declined in the south of England in the 1700s, silk weaving developed, and between 1801 and 1901 the town's population grew from about 3000 to 6000, with the arrival of the railway having strengthened the town's position as a regional centre.

Today its population is about 9000. It still has its railway station, a mill, its market, and its first school, established in

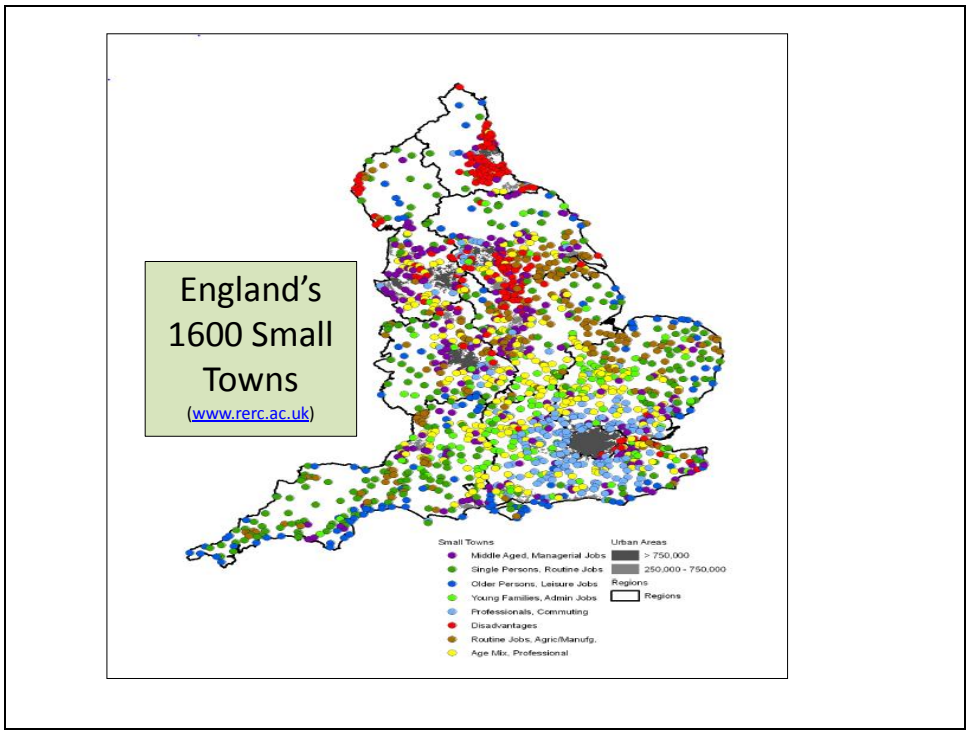
1550 as the Free Grammar School (although these days it's anything but free).

I give this potted history to make the point that, in some, and for some places, it was ever thus. The historian, G M Trevelyan, noted that, "*Self-help and self-government were for ... centuries taught **to** the English **in** the school of town life."*.

He also noted that it took more than 50 years from the 1835 Municipal Reform Act to set up Rural District Councils. As many of you will know it took much less time than that for people who live in small towns to register their disapproval and dismay when Rural District Councils were abolished in 1974. In fact, it was partly as result of being moaned at by a leading light in a town partnership about the loss of significant powers following the 1974 Act, that I became involved in market town regeneration and interested in local government and governance.

And so, we should take note, and some comfort, of the fact that despite all these ups and downs, our small towns have

proved to be remarkably resilient during their thousand or so years of decline, and are as widely dispersed, and yet as close together, as ever.



Nevertheless, in relatively recent years - for much of the twentieth century – small towns didn't feature much in the minds of policy makers. If we ignore the interest of poverty and hygiene researchers such as Rowntree, Bondfield and, particularly in the North of England, Bowley – living in towns centres was in many cases synonymous with squalor in many cases. So, although resilient, they were, of course, of their time. To some historians, England's towns were still, in the

words of W G Hoskins, the,*" ... species of island universe ..."* that had characterized them in the 18th century, although perhaps no longer, *"... separated rather than connected by an abominable road system that might have been created by savages."*

Therefore, when thought about historically, it is extraordinary how resilient most of our towns have been. For example, the coming of the Turnpikes, more than 1000 of them in 40 years, followed by the railways, were good for some places and bad for others in much the same way that tourism and niche shopping has helped some, whilst the decline in mining and fishing has harmed, or even destroyed, others.

Similarly:

the coming of the car, the decline of the canals, the growth of the suburbs, the decline and, some places, growth again, of the cinema;

motorways and by-passes which relieve traffic pressure and isolate at the same time, the impact of supermarkets, the loss of town-specific breweries (also changing now!), no-parking zones, car parking charges, and clone towns -

- nothing new here either – Russell Chamberlin in his book, The English Country Town, refers to "mummified" towns – to town centres in the 1930 characterized by, *"a dreary picture of hoardings covering derelict buildings or empty houses, liberally pasted over with posters."* -

– all these things and more have affected our towns.

Most towns have survived; some have prospered, but some have not. It's interesting to note, though, that, in our small country, we have not had to adopt a policy, informal or formal, of managed abandonment, such as has happened in Canada, and elsewhere, for example, Australia and the USA.

There have been changes, however, not least, as I mentioned earlier, in the powers available to those who, for example, seek office as Councillors, or who volunteer to be involved in local, community-led, development. The late Ray Pahl, Professor at the Universities of Kent and Essex, Director of Action for Market Towns, and a leading light on changes in rural areas, coined the phrase, "The Forgotten Fifth" – 20% of England's population live in our towns - and noted how, *"In the 19th century business people did much to improve their own towns and cities by providing parks, libraries, towns halls, and other public goods."* I assume that many of these, if not Councillors themselves, would have been Aldermen, elected by the Council, possibly for their good works, or for

their wider influence. Today, not only have Aldermen largely disappeared from councils, but so have many of the powers.

That said, although country towns were pretty much ignored during the twentieth century, things began to change in the 1990s, and it's worth bearing in mind the long period of neglect prior to the 1990s, as we consider where we are today and where our small towns might aspire to be, tomorrow.

Let's spend a few minutes looking back over the last 15 to 20 years.

Interest in towns gradually grew during the 1990s to the extent that they featured quite strongly in the Rural White Paper of 1995, and significantly so in the second, in 2000. These developments represented a marked change compared with the previous post war years.

Post-war, broadly speaking, investigations into small towns considered, for example, rural services, transport, and changes in the composition of their populations during a time of social, economic and demographic change. These last were

stimulated by interest in the increasing counter-urbanization and deindustrialisation taking place in rural England, as more people chose to live in the countryside at the same time as the number of people reliant on agriculture-related and other primary industries, such as forestry and mining, declined. These studies were mainly *ad hoc*, and done for, rather than by, local people).

Academic interest continued into and beyond the 1970s, and, from the early 1990s, organizations with rural interests monitored and researched aspects of rural life, both in terms of specific topics such as Paul Cloke and Co's "lifestyles" work in the mid-90s, following Brian McLaughlin's challenging investigations into deprivation in the 1980s, and, of course, Mark Shucksmith's and Philip Lowe's work.

Between 1999 and the late 2000s, the condition of rural England from a variety of perspectives, economic, environmental and social, was formally reported on annually by the Countryside Agency, and then the Commission for Rural Communities. At the same time, community development workers increasingly encouraged local people to

use community planning tools, and politicians of all parties began to talk about how power might be devolved to local areas, with, from 1997, according to Professor Helen Sullivan, *"... community leadership ... placed at the heart of local government reform."*

So, until the 1990s interest in small towns was pretty much confined to a relatively small number of geographers, historians, and sociologists. Small towns were seen as too urban to be rural, and too rural to be urban. For example, many pit villages fell within the small town population band, but, as they existed because of their connection to a heavy, dirty, geographically concentrated extractive primary industry, these places were perceived to be urban. The contrast between these and the many older, prettier, agriculture-orientated stereotypical country towns is stark. The fact that agriculture is also a primary industry can be set to one side; for, where England's small towns are concerned, appearance plays a large part in how people intuitively define them.

To define places on the basis of their appearance is simplistic, but easy. Arriving at more objective definitions is altogether more difficult.

We are still asking the question ... what are they? They are not easy to define.

We all know that England's small country towns are known, generically, as market towns. In some cases, such as those with mediaeval market charters, this term is wholly accurate, but it, I think, often romantic, imprecise, impressionistic, unhelpful, and metropolitan in perception. Of course, many towns owe their origins to the presence of traders' markets, their governing charters, and their historical role as trading centres for surrounding dependent settlements, but not all towns have, or have ever had, markets, and some of those that do are large regional centres.

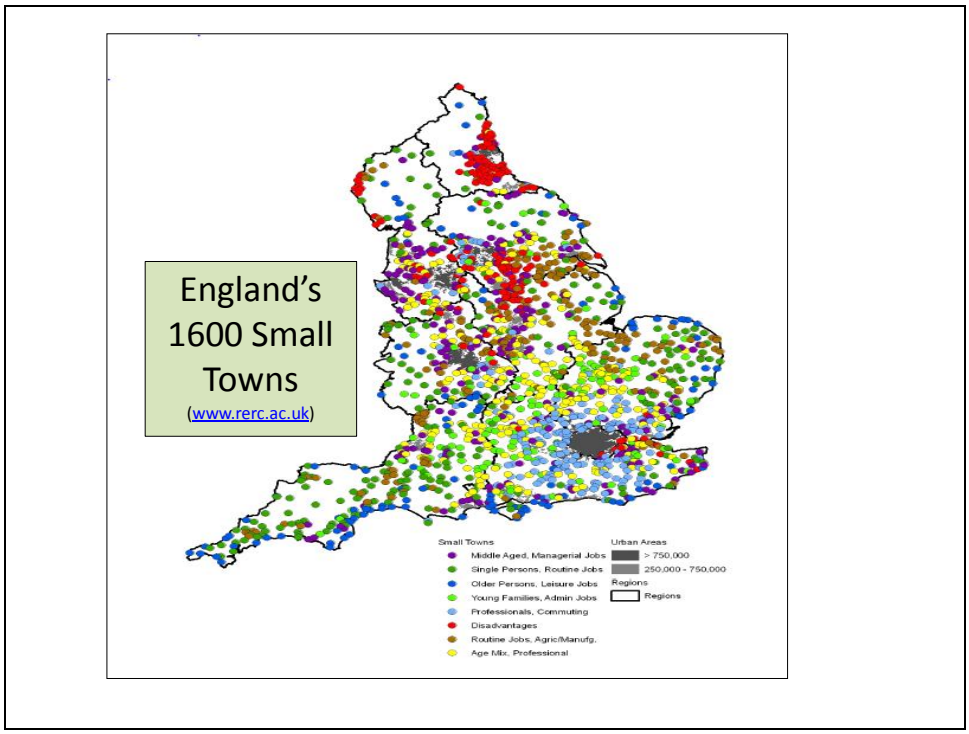
I think the term, whilst probably with us forever, is, when it comes to policy and practice unhelpful in general, and specifically unhelpful to those towns whose histories are associated with primary industries such as mining.

And so, given these terminological difficulties, it is not surprising that classification has been largely based on populations, with a band of 2,000 to 20,000 having been the generally accepted norm for small towns. This band was used in the 1990s by the then Rural Development Commission, the long-established rural development organization, and was the main, but by no means always rigorously applied, eligibility criterion for the Market Towns Initiative.

Where more complicated analysis is concerned, about roles, for example, small towns have been the subject of debate for quite a while. Lord Scott's committee mentioned them in their 1942 report, and more recently, during the 2000s, consultants and academics have had a go at pinning down this rather elusive category.

It's still problematic. Broadly, today, as we've already seen, about 1,600 towns with populations between 1,500 and 40,000 are considered by their populations to be small towns. Within this range lies the Local Authority Rural-Urban

Classification which defines Large Market Towns as those with populations of 10,000-30,000.



This search for a single clear definition is understandable, but is arguably something of a fool's errand. Born in part at least of a bureaucratic need for clear criteria on which to base decisions concerning eligibility for participation in programmes paid for from the public purse, it can divert the energies of academics, practitioners, politicians and policymakers away from more practical matters. For example, political approaches to devolving powers and

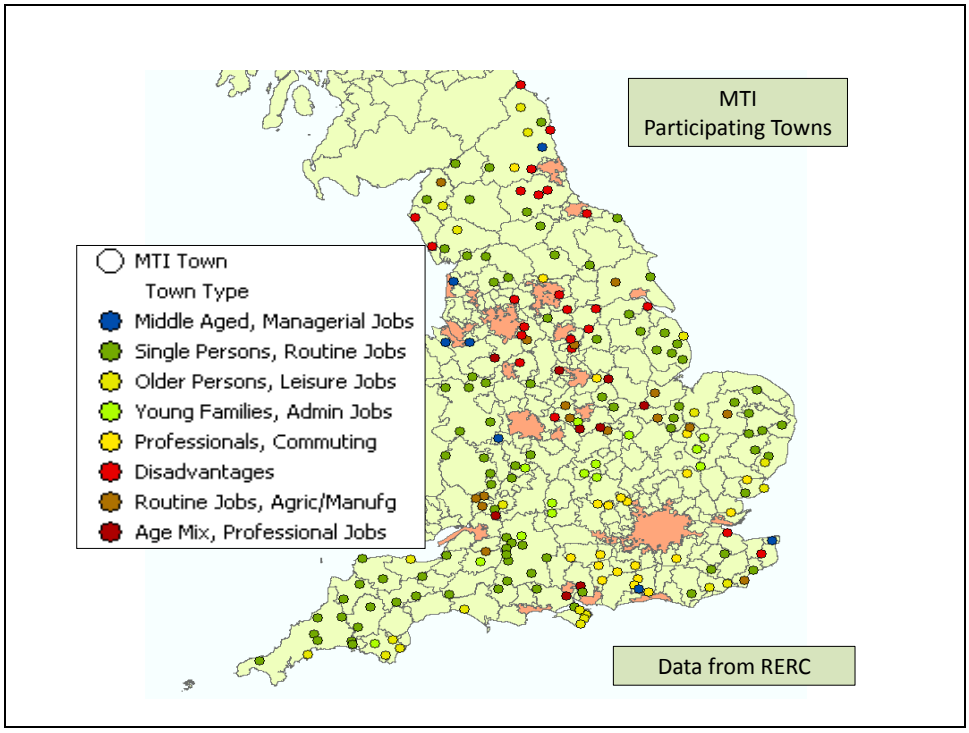
increasing local people's involvement in community-led development are not solely conditional on population, but could, nevertheless, be usefully informed by research.

Anyway, and however they are defined, small towns are an important part of the settlement hierarchy, particularly given their roles, geographical distribution, and diversity. They are also, I believe, and to an extent this is based on some research I did into the Market Towns Initiative, both an underused asset in terms of their "Big Society" potential, and, more contentiously, a democratically under-represented constituency.

I don't have time today to detail all the research into small towns that has been done since the early 1990s, but I think it's true to say that if it wasn't for the efforts of the likes of, for example, the late Andrew Errington and his colleagues, first at Reading and then Plymouth universities, John Shepherd's Rural Evidence Research Centre at Birkbeck, and Newcastle's very own Neil Powe and colleagues at various times over the years, that the Market Towns, and related, initiatives, might well not have come about. Similarly if it wasn't for the

interest and enthusiasm of officials and others, including volunteers, Action for Market Towns might not exist today. Certainly, if it wasn't for several of the above, I would not have had the opportunity to do my research, which I will, with your permission, now summarise.

Basically, I surveyed 20% of the 227 towns that – officially – took part in the MTI, and interviewed a variety of people involved in the work, including town councillors, clerks, volunteers, and official working locally, regionally and nationally. The towns were pretty well distributed, as you can see from the map that Professor John Shepherd, from Birkbeck, kindly produced for me.



The towns that took part in the Market Town Initiative community-led development programme, all volunteers, were a mixed and interesting bunch ...

The Obvious – Richmond
&
The Less Obvious - Sheerness

...similarly, the mix of participating town ***types***, relative to the 1,600 towns categories within John Shepherd's typology, and worthy of further research.

Town Types
MTI Participants cw "All Towns"
(RERC)

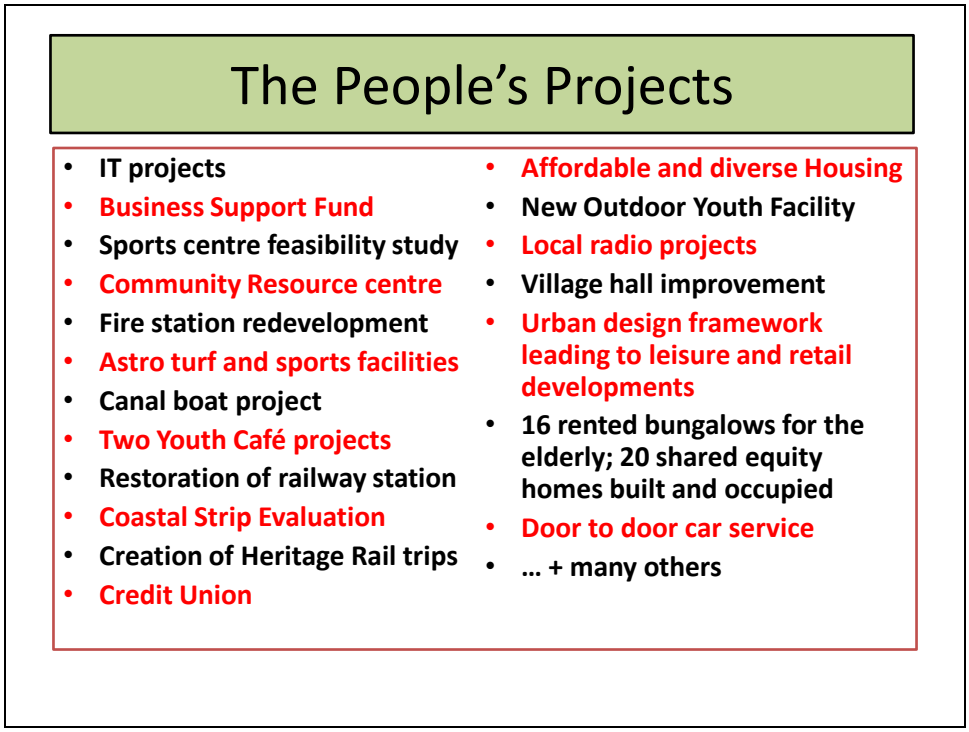
	MTI Towns		All Towns	
	No	%	No	%
Middle Aged, Managerial Jobs	7	3.5	236	14.6
Single Persons, Routine Jobs	89	44.3	261	16.1
Older Persons, Leisure Jobs	22	10.9	123	7.6
Young Families, Administrative Jobs	14	7.0	129	8.0
Professionals, Commuting	21	10.4	188	11.6
Disadvantages	23	11.4	181	11.2
Routine Jobs, Agriculture/Manufacturing	16	8.0	209	12.9
Age Mix, Professional Jobs	9	4.5	290	17.9
Total	**201**	**100**	**1617**	**100**

At the last count almost 70% of the partnerships were continuing their work.

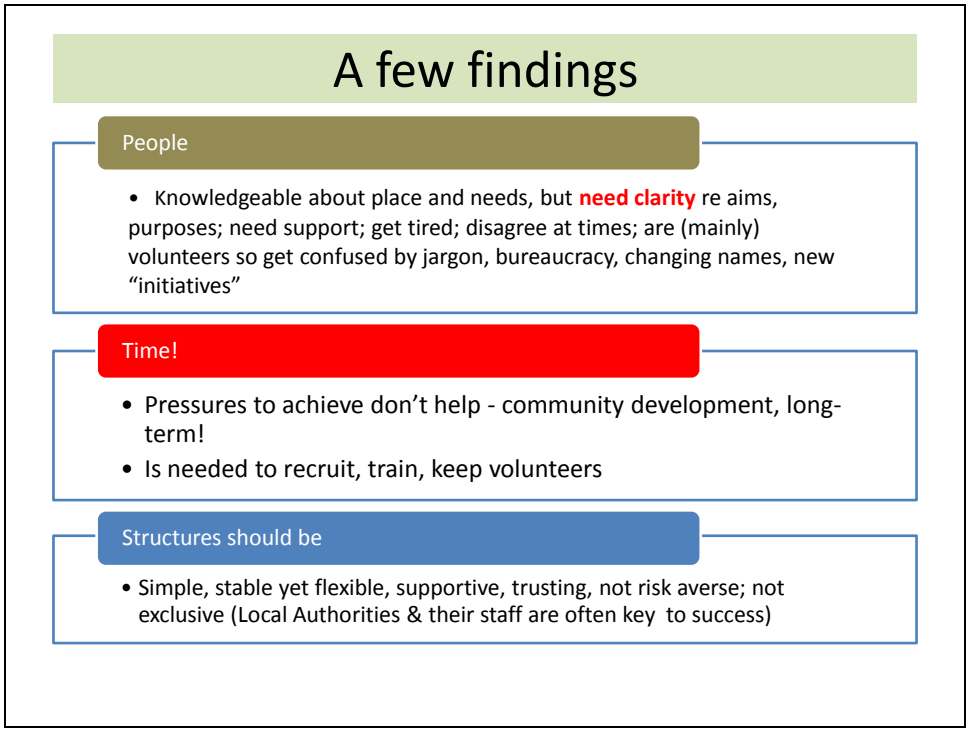
The participants told me what they thought of the programme. AS you'd probably expect, it was a mixed bag of views, ranging from, and I quote, *"Inequality is being addressed, exciting plans being developed"*, to, *"I expected it to fail, and it did!"*

That said, when asked whether the work had met expectations, the majority said that, in the main, it had.

Participants also gave some useful information about their projects ...



... and some information about the characteristics and needs of the people involved, and the need for sufficient time and appropriately supportive structures to enable them to get to grips with, and do, the work.

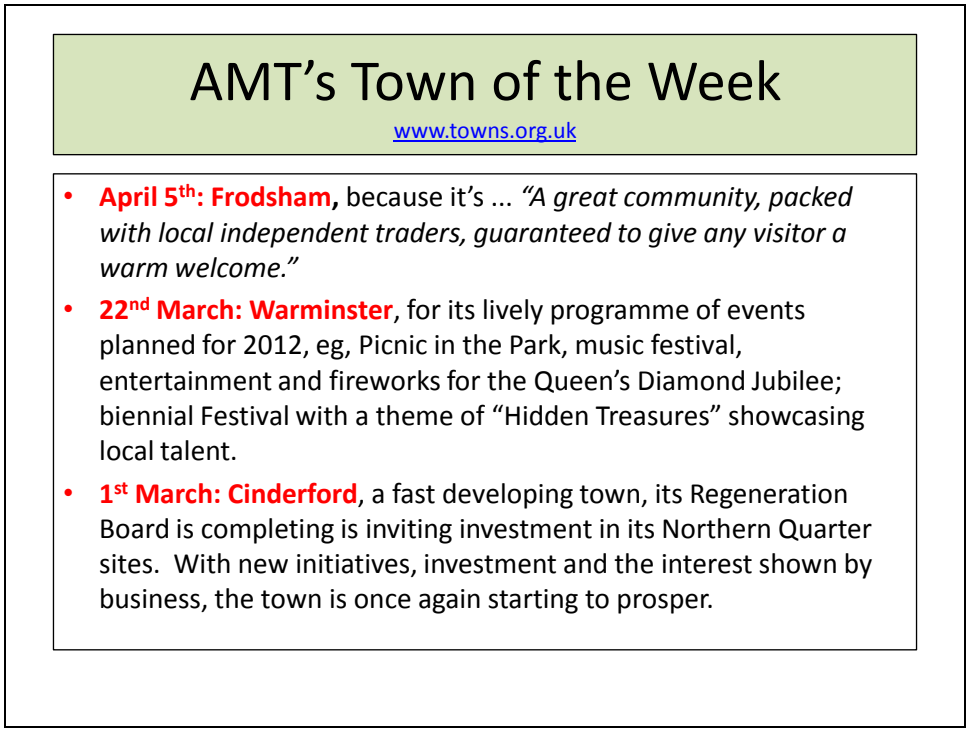


I want now to say a few words about Action for Market Towns. As well the help that towns receive from their local authorities and others, many have also been helped by this charity/membership organization, before, during and after the Market Towns Initiative. For more than ten years it has been up and running, first with the support of its members and the Rural Development Commission, which created it, and then with the help of the Countryside Agency, until, today, although blessed by a grant from the Big Lottery, it largely depends on the support of its loyal members and on income earned from its growing number of support services. Every year its annual convention seems to be as popular as ever, and

the Market Town of the Year Award is well supported, and produces some inspirational projects run by inspired and committed people – the winner last year was Mold in Wales, with a very effective “clean-up” campaign ...

AMT’s Town of the Year Award, 2011

Similarly, there is no shortage of towns vying to be the Town of the Week ... here are a few examples ...



Also, with money from the Big Lottery, and support from Action for Market Towns, a small research group started by Ray Pahl, called Small Towns for Tomorrow, exist to promote and encourage research into all aspects of our small towns.

Therefore, when one adds to this collection of interests and interest, the research work I mentioned earlier, and the support given to towns by local authorities, you can see that, compared with the period pre-1990, small towns are not lacking for friends. It is just a shame that the supportive work done by local authorities, Regional Development Agencies and others has effectively ceased, and that the likes of the

Market Towns Initiative, effectively an experiment worthy of further development, has been allowed to fade away, leaving many town partnerships somewhat isolated, in no position to share their experiences, and learn from others.

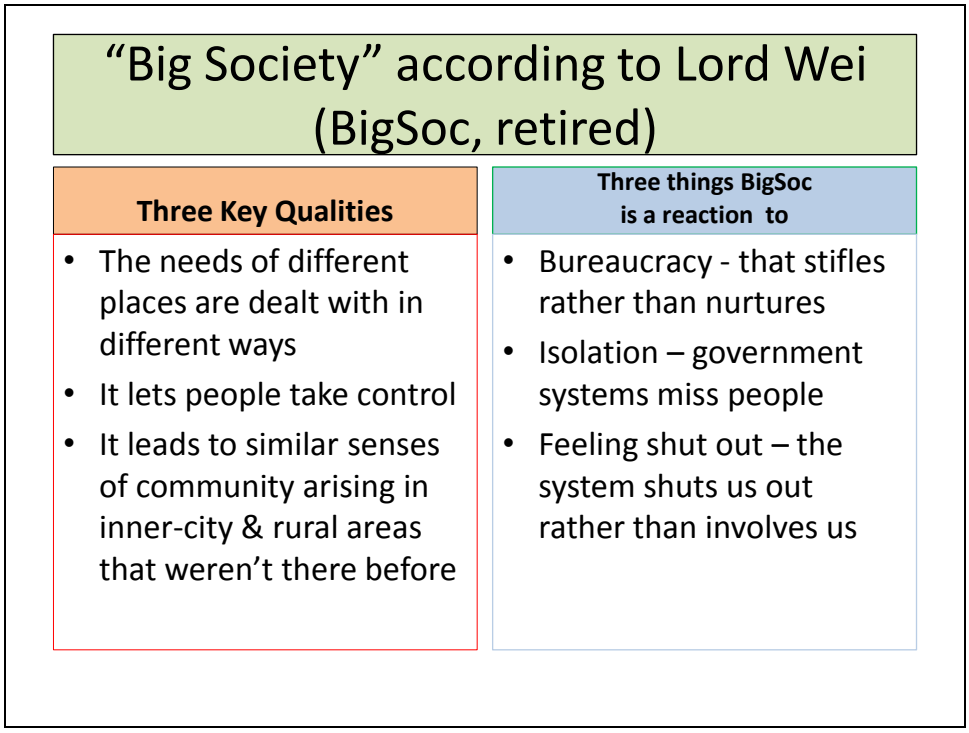
And so, with those thoughts in mind, I want to turn to the future and to my – purely personal - belief that small towns, with their strong small society identities, have much to offer the "Big Society", and my fear that the erosion of local democratic autonomy will prevent this offer from being fulfilled. The French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, on his jaunt around the USA in 1850, noted that, *"Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within people's reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government, but without municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty."*

The urban planner, Professor Sir Patrick Geddes, on the other hand, believed that if the relationship between the people, their work, where they worked and lived was ok, then, *"... the form of government was mere detail."* Well, that was then. I'm with de Tocqueville - matters of government and

governance are much more than mere details, especially in today's rapidly changing world. As far as I – and others – can tell, the Market Towns Initiative and its variants worked pretty well, not least, I want to stress, when the Town Council and other local authorities were actively involved and supportive. Partnerships are of course important, but so too is democratic accountability and the legitimacy that flows via elections.

None of this is surprising, but it goes go some way to support my belief that we do not make the most of locals, be they elected, in official positions, or volunteers. I'm sure that this isn't contentious, at least not here, but it lies at the heart of my belief that small towns epitomise the "Big Society" or, as social scientists would say, the small societies in which cooperation and competition are so evident.

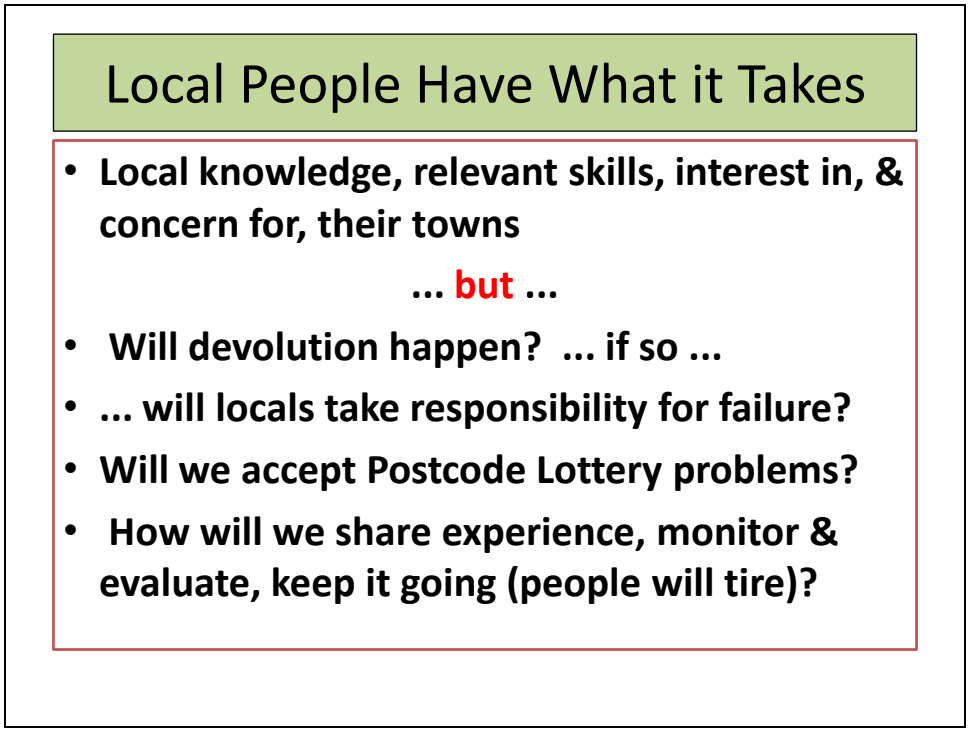
Just to remind you, this is what the Big Society is supposed to be about:



The three key qualities in the slide seem to fit well with the sort of thing I've been talking about.

I fear, however, that we are slip-sliding towards a deficit in democracy as, despite the rhetoric, local government, as opposed, perhaps, to those abstract notions of neighbourhoods and communities, that some see as replacements for, or additions to, local government, has been - is being - increasingly weakened by central government, which, these days, has relatively few people, beyond Eric Pickles, who have wide experience of local government.

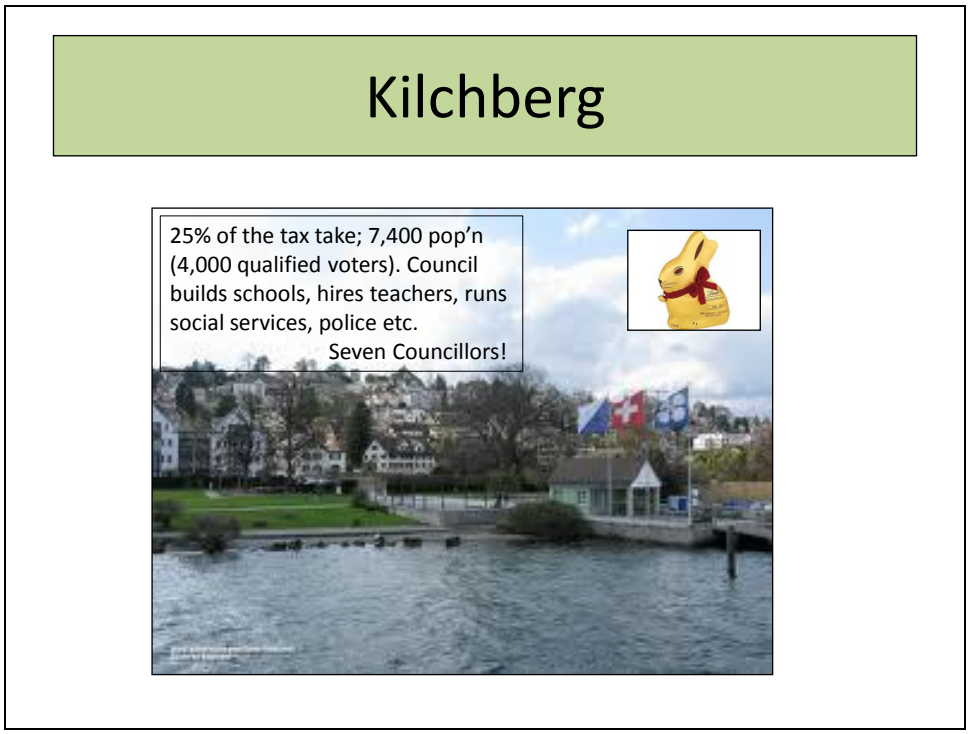
The Market Towns Initiative, and related work, none of which was perfect, and all of which were essentially experimental, convinced me of what local people 100 years ago would have known very well: that local people have what it takes, which isn't to say that there aren't hard questions to be asked and answered:



Perhaps the question now is to work out where we go from here in these challenging times - in terms of the economy, democracy, and local autonomy.

To take one example of local government from overseas, the Swiss model gives huge powers to locals. A quarter of all

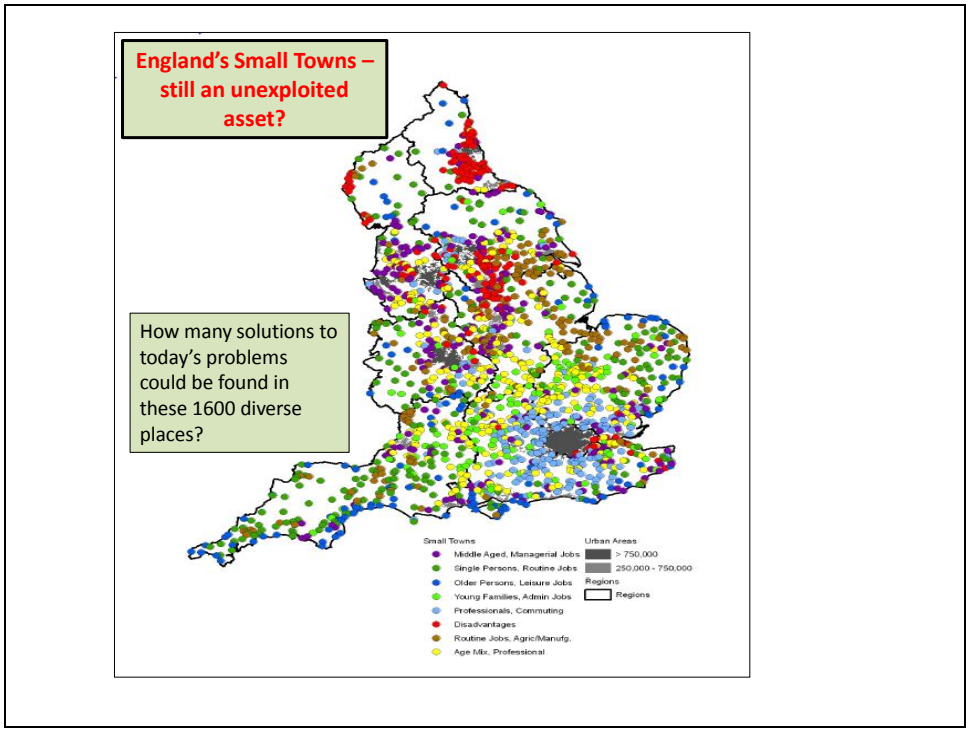
taxes raised go to local government. A bit of research took me to a town called Kilchberg (it's where Lindt chocolate's made):



Every quarter or so the seven councillors have to present their recommendations to the voters at an open meeting and then let the voters decide on fixing taxes, sorting out planning etc. It's truly local, direct democracy, and probably quite tricky if you are a councillor or official. I don't know if it would work here, but it would be nice to be able to give it, or something like it, a go; to have the option to do so.

Government could enable it, after all it is quick enough to promote – impose – elected mayors and police commissioners, and with the growth in national concern about globalisation and, at the more local level, about the impact that online shopping will have – is having – on our towns, there is surely a need to move beyond the likes of the Portas Review, which was nationally commissioned and the implementation of which is nationally controlled in that it has been decided that the bulk of the money is to be managed by local authorities above town council/partnership level.

It seems likely that retail will no longer be the panacea that some have seen it to be for some towns, and that, with job shortages and rising energy, water and fuel prices, with all the implications for employment and security, that we must tap the local knowledge and expertise that exists in these 1,600 or so resilient places if we are to find local solutions.

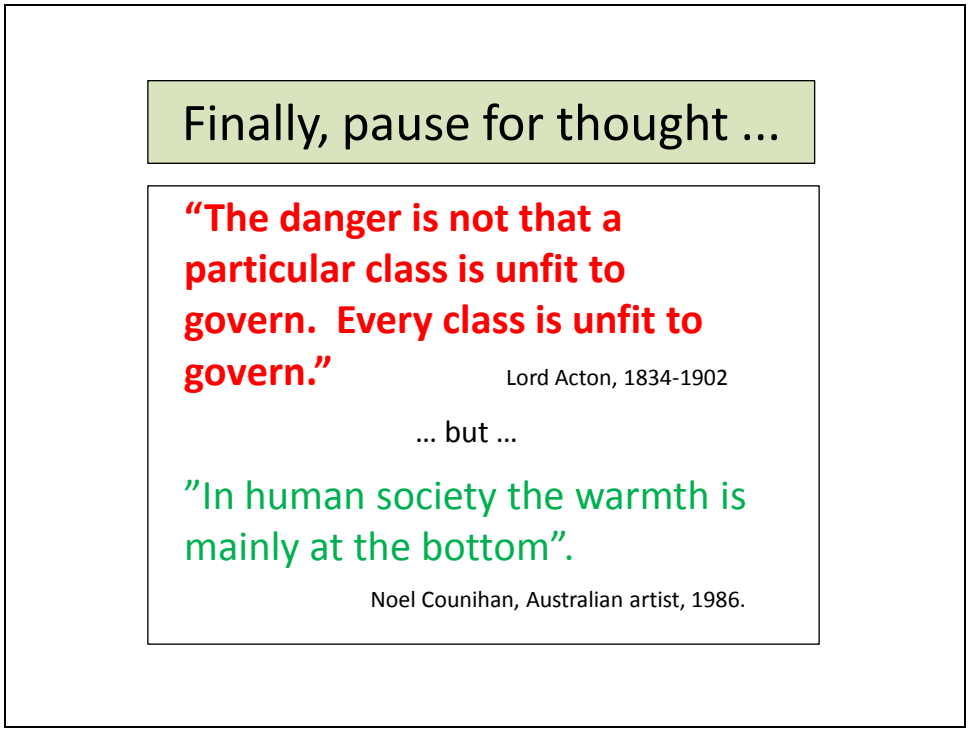


Remember, most employment growth occurs in small businesses, and small towns and other rural areas have a good record where this type of business is concerned. They are also good at setting up local services, such as credit unions, and who's to say that recent developments such as crowd-sourcing and crowd-funding for ideas and finance for local businesses, projects or other initiatives – such as a form of micro-finance.

It's also worth remembering that many of the social and environmental improvements we take for granted came not from municipal governments in the nineteenth century, not

from central governments, which were too busy trying to run an Empire.

Our job, as enthusiasts for these places, and their people, is to draw attention to their potential and their natural place in the settlement hierarchy, and to work to influence central government to be brave, and to take off the democratic and financial shackles – they will need tax raising and retention powers - that prevent local people from fulfilling their potential. It's worth remembering that, as I said just now, few national party politicians now have experience of local government, but they are local MPs, many of them with small towns in their constituencies, and as someone once said, ultimately, for elected politicians, all politics is local, and nothing is, or ever has been, perfect ...



... but, if we believe that small towns have the potential to inform policy and practice on a bigger stage, then we need to influence MPs and others; to educate them.

If that is the challenge, then it's our challenge.

Thank you.

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