The future of small towns

Process, people and patience

Challenges

- Change
  - Classic hierarchical pattern of how settlements work is no longer universally true; what replaces it?
  - Increased mobility has changed the way we live
  - Employment structures continue to evolve
  - How public and commercial services are delivered is continuing to change
  - Expectation of residents develops
- Managing change:
  - Is resource of businesses and communities equal to the task?

Overview

- Outline some initiatives for reviving small towns
- Highlight some of the issues these have raised
- Review some case studies of small town regeneration
- Consider the issue of managing small town growth and development
- Highlight a few lessons

Small towns: some national initiatives

- Main Street USA and Canada
  - A regeneration program promoted, from about 1980, by heritage organisations. Provided an input to the formation of:
- Action for Market Towns
  - An English resource/lobbying organisation for small towns, established 1997 but wound up 2014
- Market Towns Initiative
  - Mainly run by Regional Development Agencies; based on a professionally prepared 'health check' and 'action plan'
  - "Renaissance Market Towns" – in Yorkshire, a more strategic approach, looking at groups of towns over a longer time period
- Neighbourhood Plans in England
  - Whilst not a regeneration initiative per se, they reveal something about local preferences, wishes and capabilities

# Some key points from these initiatives

- The importance of analysis before action:
  - Identify the role of the town, in present day reality and policy; this can offer a basis for comparisons and transferring best practice, and strategy development
  - Needs to focus on both content – town assets – and context – "a solid understanding of the market realities of the district"(Main Street, USA)
  - Needs to cover more than just the shops – seeking to answer the question "how can this place function better as a community" not just be a better shopping centre

Key points [contd.]

- Local ownership and input is important:
  - Community input must complement that of the 'experts' helping in analysis, planning and delivery
  - Help avoid organisational and community tensions
  - But, significant limitations on local capacity
- Short vs. long term
  - Change is a long term process, but…
  - Communities usually need some quick "wins" to sustain commitment
  - Long term commitment of public funding is rare

Policy-led regeneration:
Upper Calder Valley

The valley is an area of former textile production, which declined from the second half of the 20th century. The towns are sandwiched between, but physically isolated from, a number of large urban settlements. The valley bottom hosts good transport links to the urban centres. The five towns are different in character and levels of prosperity.
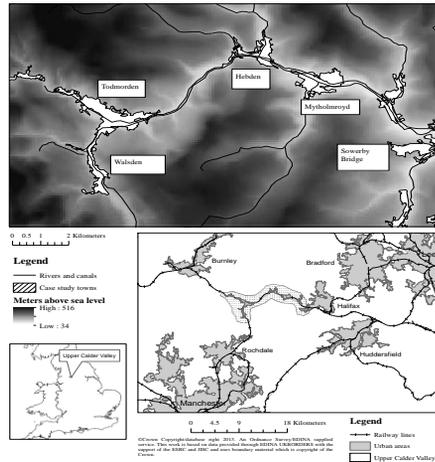
Policy-led regeneration:
Upper Calder Valley

- Driven by the desire of the RDA for a longer term, more strategic approach than MTI; again, draws from a US model
- Grouping of five towns, along with local district council and the RDA
- Professionally compiled strategy mainly aimed to remove blight and give town centres a competitive and contemporary edge
- Included formal efforts to develop capacity of community to subsequently run programme

Policy-led regeneration:
Upper Calder Valley

- Valley-wide strategy was as much an arena for rivalry and antipathy as cooperation
- Slow progress after publication of the strategy led to local frustration
- Strategy not drawn on a blank canvas – pre-existing plans and key local agencies and active individuals
- Few valley-wide projects realised, most were in town centres
- Most completed projects took between six and ten years, in part due to complexity of development process; ten years was maybe too short a timescale for the programme
- Valley-wide body dissolved following the demise of the RDA but some community level initiatives have emerged: some of these will generate a revenue stream to fund future activities and utilise the community capacity built

Community-led regeneration:
Development Trust model

Five development trusts (social enterprises) were reviewed in Northumberland. All had some public sector input at their origins, in studying their needs, and in project funding. Not all succeeded in the longer term, but all stepped in where the market seemed to fear to tread. All communities had been faced with declining employment and some dereliction in the towns.
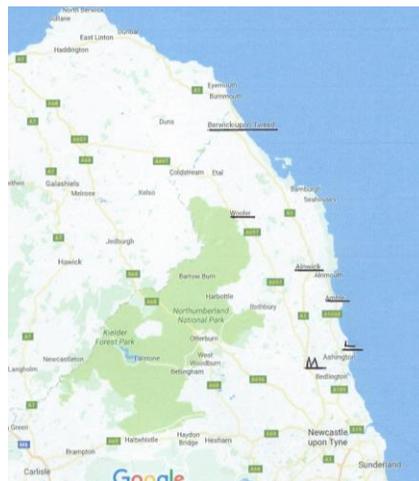
Community-led regeneration: Development Trust model

- Why are they needed?
  - 'Something needs to be done'
  - Local political bodies are constrained in what they do – lack a regeneration focus and can't easily take risks
  - Investment needed does not offer the type of return sought by the market
- What have they contributed?
  - Long-term engagement sustained by revenue from assets
  - Charitable status increases chance of attracting external funding
  - Provide an umbrella or anchor for other local voluntary activity
  - Positive results!

Community-led regeneration: Development Trust model

- Some key features
  - They need to be professional in their management and decision making
  - Specialist knowledge not necessary but a level of awareness essential
  - Need to recruit appropriate professional staff but ones who 'buy in' to the ethos of the Trust
  - A town strategy can be formal or informal but need to have a picture of where the town is going

Retail – some key themes

- Town centres should not be seen as "merely places to buy, but places to be" – people should have multiple reasons to visit the town centre
- Location needs to be 'sold' to local residents, and convenience and environmental quality are an important part of this; get the basics right
- Capturing comparison trade is more challenging than sustaining convenience shopping
- Addressing physical barriers to development and renewal can be critical; impact of inserting larger format multiples on the edge of a town centre can make a significant impact

Retail – some key themes

- Strategies for improvement need to be based on an understanding of catchments, demographics and preferences – what the most successful competitors will have
- Ideally, strike a balance between distinctive independent traders and known brands
- Successful centres may need to attract visitors as well as locals, but there are dangers in catering for tourists
- Need to consider impact of improvement of one centre on other nearby towns
- Success depends on the quality of individual businesses but their selection is almost beyond control

Morpeth:
Sanderson
Arcade
All the right
attributes?
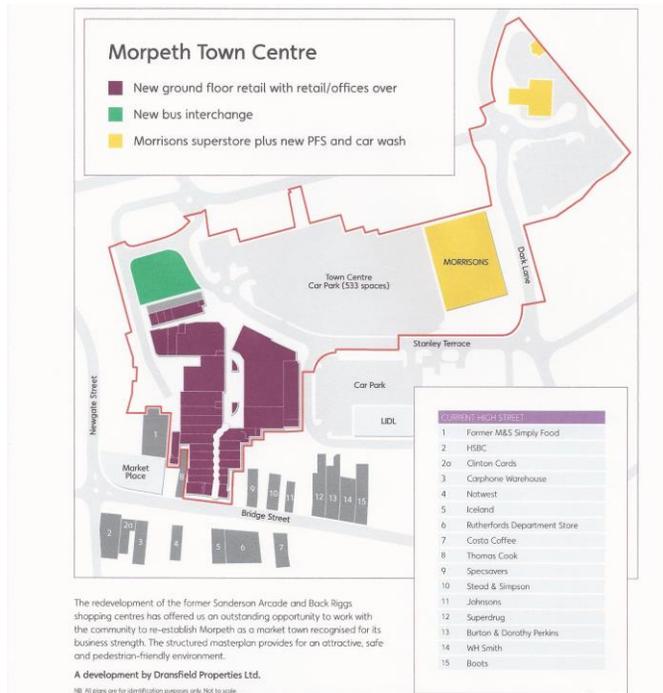
The impact of growth

- Successful places grow, but can delivery of growth be effectively managed?
  - Population growth tends to come from migrants – mainly commuters and retirees – who want the basis of their choice of location to be maintained
  - Overriding concern in growing small towns is to maintain environmental quality and avoid evolution to a 'clone town'
  - Second key concern is when service provision fails to keep pace with residential growth – a prevalent problem in most small towns studied, and one which will become more difficult with austerity and fragmentation of the public sector
  - Problems seem equally prevalent in both planned and market-led growth

Limits to analysis and planning?

- A community of 800+ houses, in a distinctly separate settlement on the urban periphery, built to serve a large textile mill, opened 1853 closed 1987; then, houses were unattractive to buy or rent
- Now, a 'sought after' location:
  - Mill purchased and turned into arts/shopping/dining venue and business premises housing successful businesses
  - Railway station re-opened offering links to two nearby cities, one of which boomed, fuelling a demand for property
  - Town designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and adjoining park (part of WHS) renewed with £4.5m grant
  - Now, home for young, highly qualified, higher earning people, largely highly committed to the future of the town
  - Also something of a tourist destination but maintains a good range of local shops
- Whilst there was an awareness of its value, at best this was the basis for aspirations rather than a plan. Success to a degree has been based on taking advantage of opportunities as they arose, by individuals and institutions

Key lessons

- Process of change:
  - Needs to be based on sound understanding of place and potential of the town, in relation to others
  - No one best model of 'how to do it'; needs to be tailored to the situation and resources of the locality
- People:
  - Getting the right people is as important as getting the right structures
  - Community engagement can be hard gain and sustain; important to learn how to handle inevitable tensions
- Persistence:
  - Change is a long-term process, maybe never-ending
  - Long-term commitment, of people and funds, the ideal basis for success