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# Time for Towns

A new agenda for UK towns

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Millions of people in the UK and Ireland live in medium-sized towns. Our towns are critical to wellbeing.

Too often, however, the voices of towns are ‘crowded out’ of the public policy arena: for funding, for innovation, and for development planning. Towns are frequently seen in the context of serving either a powerful city region or a rural hinterland. Discussions about towns can focus on ‘saving’ or ‘preserving’, rather than ‘progressing’ or ‘rethinking’, while regional governance models are rarely configured around town boundaries. Policy and practice needs to recognise the unique needs, priorities and opportunities of towns and give these due prominence within decision-making about how to develop local places.

The Carnegie UK Trust has identified ‘Flourishing Towns’ as one of its thematic priorities

for 2016-2020. For the next five years we will be supporting the development of vibrant, innovative and empowered town communities.

Drawing on our wide variety of policy and practice work to date, including our leading TestTown initiative which has promoted entrepreneurship and town centre regeneration; our Twin Town competition supporting and celebrating innovative town partnerships; our leadership in the construction of USP.scot, Scotland’s online comparative data platform for town communities; and our Turnaround Towns research looking at international best practice in town development, we have developed a new agenda for towns in the UK.



**These are our key asks for all those interested in town socioeconomic development across the UK.**

# A new agenda for UK towns

Our key asks for all those interested in town socioeconomic development across the UK:

## 1 Towns need more decision-making abilities

Towns in the UK have access to relatively few of the levers of change identified through international case studies as being important to delivering positive change. For example, individual towns in the UK are unable to take decisions relating to local taxation, regulation or investment incentives. Consideration should be given to how towns might have a greater say over such mechanisms as part of ongoing policy debates about devolution, decentralisation and community empowerment.

## 2 We need more data about towns, and more evidence about 'what works' for towns

There is relatively limited evidence on how towns across the UK are performing across a wide range of economic, social and environmental issues. Most large datasets collect information either very locally at household or postcode level, or on a regionalised basis at local authority level. The lack of data makes it difficult for towns to identify priorities, chart progress and compare themselves to similar places. A new focus should be given to how town-level data can be captured, used and shared.

Alongside the lack of data on towns, there is a limited evidence base on how towns across the world have overcome challenge. In this respect towns are often 'crowded out' by the legitimate and important spatial policy interests of cities and rural areas.



Building on the World Towns Framework, more attention and focus should be given to the development of a rich, robust research base to inform future town development globally.

### **3 We need to foster local leadership in towns**

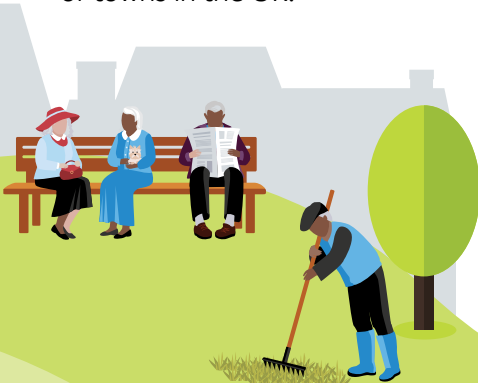
Well-connected, ambitious local leaders have played a central role in most successful ‘turnaround town’ stories. If more towns in the UK are to experience such change then town leadership needs to be cultivated and supported through appropriate mechanisms. Potential or future leaders can benefit, for example, from opportunities to network with each other and to experience how other places have successfully delivered change. Consideration should be given to how such supporting mechanisms can be developed for current and aspiring leaders of towns in the UK.

### **4 Community engagement is essential**

Citizens have a vital role to play in shaping the purpose, goal and aims of towns and embodying the town’s narrative or ‘story’. Having such a purpose or story is critical to a positive internal and external perspective of the town. Opportunities to engage, collaborate and co-produce with citizens must be at the heart of approaches to town development across the UK.

### **5 Towns need support to work together**

Towns are diverse, complex, and grow in systems and relationships rather than isolation. Often, neighbouring towns have different strengths and characteristics, which if developed in harmony could result in significant improvements in wellbeing for citizens. Too often, however, funding and governance arrangements put towns in competition with each other for resources and influence. Consideration should be given to models that can support innovative, collaborative partnerships between towns for mutual gain.





## 6 We need to supercharge enterprise

Enterprise and innovation are vital for our town centres. The UK is the one of the fastest growing online retail markets in the world. Town centre rates and rents are out of reach of the majority of start-up businesses. The debate continues as to what town centres are for. However, there is a growing recognition of the need to look at the challenges and opportunities of town centres differently, for considering and implementing different kinds of solutions and innovation.

From our work on TestTown we believe there are a number of

actions that all towns can take to ‘supercharge’ enterprise and innovation: a clear, supported pathway into trading and opening up a shop for new town centre entrepreneurs; a permanent pop-up facility in a viable trading space which offers flexible lease arrangements for new town centre entrepreneurs; reduced rates and rents, wherever possible, for new traders during their first year of business; regular entrepreneur-led consultations to feed into a business led strategy for town centre development; and local cross-sector partnerships to lead local innovation, ensuring that agencies, businesses and residents are all involved in leading economic development.

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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The logo for CarnegieUK TRUST features the text 'CarnegieUK' in a large, white, serif font, with 'TRUST' in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it. A white curved line arches over the text.

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Carnegie United Kingdom Trust  
Scottish charity SC 012799 operating in the UK and Ireland  
Incorporated by Royal Charter 1917

ISBN 978-1909447554



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