

SUMMARY

RURAL ENTREPRENEURS IN AND AROUND THE TYNE VALLEY SHARE ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONCERNS AND HAVE OVERLAPPING VISIONS FOR THEIR FUTURE TOWNS.

These are based on community and kindness, hard work and passion, as well as the value inherent in people's well-being, restoration of nature and protection and development of the local culture and heritage - founded on a natural friendliness that's part of a Northumbrian way of life.

Their vision is centred on helping smaller and independent businesses and town councils work together to support thriving town centres that are self-sustaining and inclusive, with space and time for everyone. To achieve this they would like to see more community owned services and organisations that provide focal points for work, play and learning, connected to green spaces, public transport, walking and micro-mobility networks that reach within and between their towns. They recognise that private vehicles are an important part of rural communities but they don't need to dominate their towns or the way we plan for the future.



“THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME ARE INDEED GLOBAL IN SCALE. BUT THE MOST EFFECTIVE & CATALYTIC SOLUTIONS CAN OFTEN BE FOUND AT THE LOCAL LEVEL.”

Despite these aspirations, entrepreneurs don't have all the knowledge or experience to achieve these goals alone. They'd like communities, local and central government agencies to collaborate rather than compete for limited resources and want other organisations - societies, schools, healthcare and heritage to join in.

There's a lack of trust in developers, landowners and larger businesses, and while they don't want special interest groups or individuals to dominate decision making about their shared future, not every entrepreneur recognises the urgency for radical change.

The tools that we used in these workshops helped to collect perspectives and stimulate discussion. But they do not provide a quantifiable platform that towns can use to justify a future vision and they aren't yet suitable for large consensus building group activities. To take this work forward, we need to partner with planning organisations, digital platforms and democracy experts so that design research can complement other quantitative and deliberative engagement techniques that are available today.

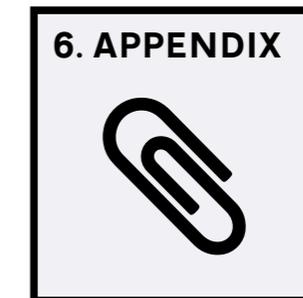
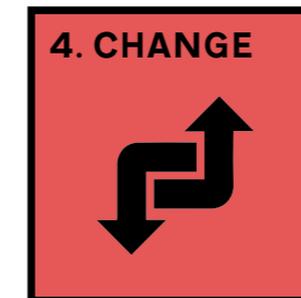
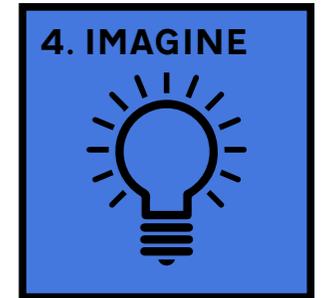
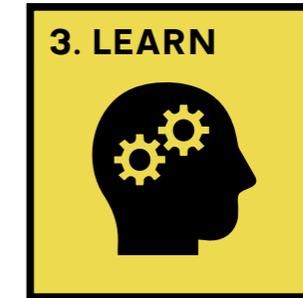
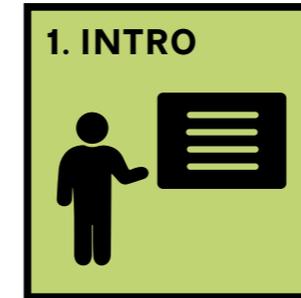


ABOUT THE TEAM

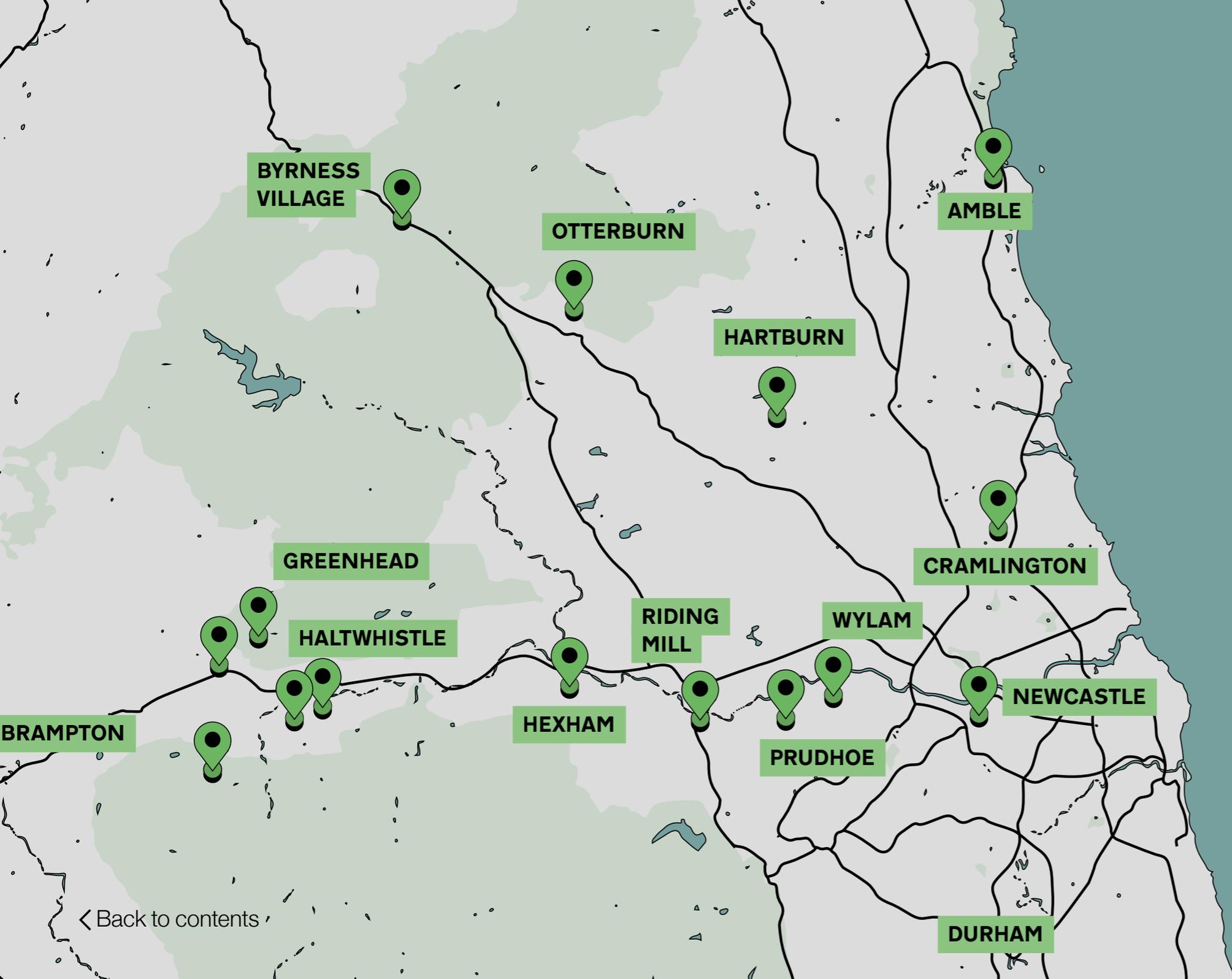
The Intelligent Mobility Design Centre at the Royal College of Art leads research at the intersection of people, mobility and technology within a complex and changing urban and global environment. The People & Places studio explores the relationships between society, place-making and our transport systems and how design might respond to this relationship through new forms of architecture and sustainable mobility products, services and experiences. We received funding from NICRE, the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise who collaborate, research and co-design ideas to foster rural enterprise and unlock the potential of rural economies. We also received support from the following organisations:

- Chartered Institute of Highways and Transportation
- Community Action Northumberland
- Haltwhistle Partnership
- Prudhoe Community Partnership
- Royal Town Planning Institute
- Rural Design Centre
- The Transport Planning Society
- Tyne Valley Community Rail Partnership

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WHERE WE ARE BASED



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1. INTRO

THIS PROJECT AIMS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVEMENT OF RURAL ENTERPRISES BY ENABLING A DEEPER AND RICHER EVALUATION OF ENTREPRENEURIAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS AROUND COMMUNITY LED PLACE-MAKING AND TRANSPORT PLANNING IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSIVE WELL-BEING AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION.

Key areas that we investigated include entrepreneurial attitudes towards political differences, environmental issues including climate change and net zero / circular supply chains; social challenges around health and isolation; the impact of technology on work and communities; and the state of the economy including issues like inequality and skills.

This understanding has been used to develop new ways of engaging with rural entrepreneurs so that they might place a greater value on the social, environmental and economic costs of their current working practices and increase their desire to formulate entrepreneurial responses that help to strengthen and speed up the transition to more community oriented and climate restorative approaches to business development.

In particular, we aimed to help the Haltwhistle Partnership, as well as other organisations within the Tyne Valley, better understand entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours around community led place-making and transport planning.

CONTEXT

This work builds on the Our Future Towns project carried out by the Royal College of Art's Intelligent Mobility Design Centre in 2020.

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It arose in response to environmental, social and technological change, the way we live our lives and imagine our towns and communities, and the evident power of visual and creative tools to help people understand and act differently.

Through this work we proposed a creative approach that helps communities to develop a shared vision for the places that they live. While we have engaged with “parents, creatives and healthcare professionals, local businesses and the recently retired, artists, crafters”, this project enables us to focus on the needs and aspirations of entrepreneurs and rural enterprises.



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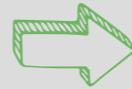
The project uses theories of system change and the need to engage with people's hearts and minds as we develop solutions for our future towns



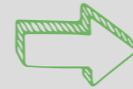
PHILOSOPHY



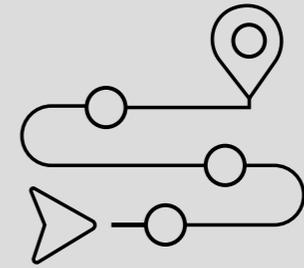
EMOTIONS



KNOWLEDGE



EXPERIENCE



MATERIAL



2. LISTEN



WE LISTENED TO 13 ENTREPRENEURS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS, REPRESENTING FOR PROFIT AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES, WORKING IN AND NEAR THE TYNE VALLEY. THIS SECTION SUMMARISES WHAT WE HEARD THROUGH WRITTEN AND ONLINE CONVERSATIONS.

We asked participants to share more about themselves, their businesses, attitudes towards the places they live and how they get around as well as their beliefs about the future and their experiences during the on-going Covid-19 pandemic.

These methods for listening and supporting conversations about the future showed that entrepreneurs had overlapping interests and attitudes even though they came from a variety of business backgrounds and places around Northumberland.

The output from this activity is a valuable addition to a town's conversation about the future and brings an entrepreneurial focus that can complement other voices. Open questions that cover everything from the nature of rural communities, future transport and their businesses gathers a wide range of knowledge that can help town and transport planning as well as wider social, economic and environmental development.

ABOUT US

“ We’re ambitious, hard-working, skilled and community focussed and we value these things in others too.

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We’re entrepreneurs, innovators and community evangelists. We’re managers, shop owners, councillors, volunteers and teachers. We’re involved in hospitality and tourism, eco-products and food. We’re infrastructure experts and partnership builders.

We want to create new projects, collaborations and businesses. We enjoy problem-solving, being catalysts and connectors. We want to make positive change locally and inspire others too. We live in a beautiful part of the world but we’re worried about the climate, dishonesty and insularity and want to see more focus on locality, high quality, less waste, less on profit, more on culture and care.”



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OUR VALUES

We value a sense of community, helping others, kindness and sharing. We value hard work, passion and a drive to succeed. We value nature, our historic market towns and the creativity needed to help us thrive.

HOW WE CAN HELP OUR TOWNS?

We're doers, triers and organisers, planners and developers. We can analyse, write bids, secure funds, organise events and create social change. We can lead and support others and make good team players. We have the enthusiasm, experience and connections to achieve great things.

CHALLENGES

It takes time to build partnerships, access funding and deal with councils. A lack of ambition, aspiration and apathy in equal measure. Shared environments to come together and create social connectivity and on the practical front, we need smarter infrastructure - both physical and digital.



ABOUT OUR BUSINESSES

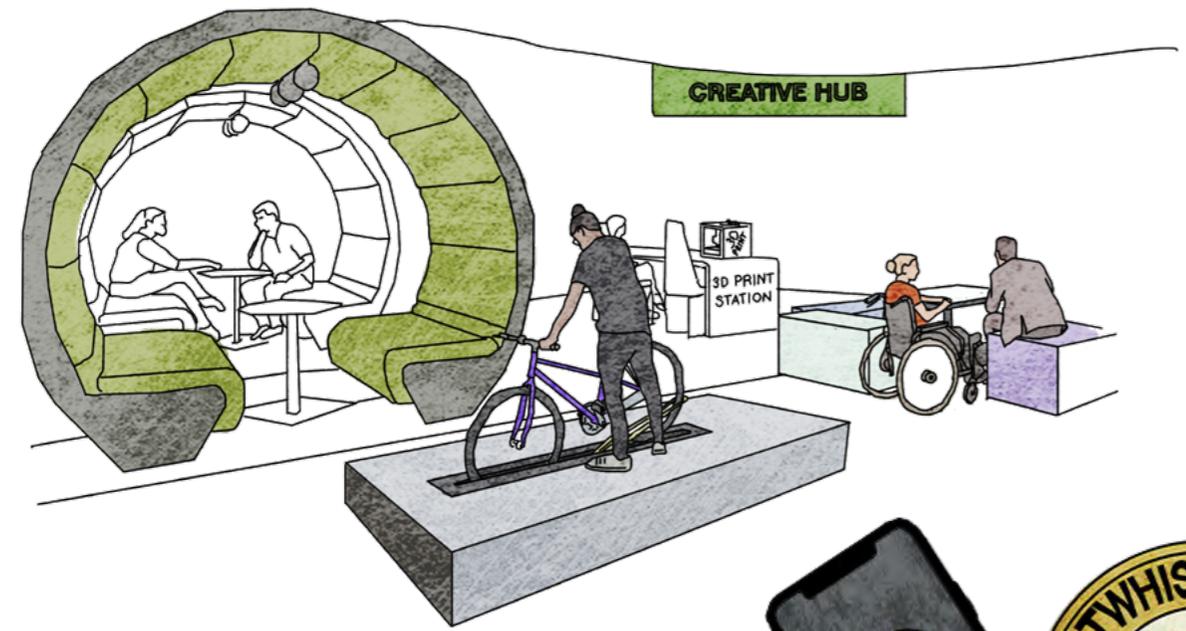
“ We want to see thriving businesses that are integrated into our communities, sustainable and locally sourced. But we worry about isolation and detachment, low-quality services and a lack of shared vision.

We serve the towns and villages along the Tyne and across Northumberland, providing locals, travellers and visitors with the things that they need. We're fiercely local but have an international audience too.

We try to source locally, from the UK where we can, but some of our supplies come from as far away as the Gulf and the States. What's our carbon footprint, we don't know? If we move things around, we use couriers, our cars and diesel vans. We haven't tried more eco-friendly transport options yet.

We need financial resources and people with new skills to help us grow. We need to adapt our high streets to the digitally enabled world. We need to develop our services for quality and experience rather than the lowest cost. We need to think in terms of long term sustainability and make our towns attractive places throughout the year. We need to recover from the pandemic and not go back to before.





We want to be the best at what we do, to be recognised, replicated and grow. We want to show that local beats global and be a place that people want to work. We want to help our communities thrive and be connected sustainably. We want to be sustainable, responsible and create shared spaces that help us to develop our businesses and towns together.

We want to keep things local, see less outsourcing and poor planning that changes the dynamic of our towns. But tenants and landlords have different visions and we often feel like passive recipients rather than stakeholders in our future. We still have problems with quality and the lack of variety and many businesses have outdated standards for service and care.



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ABOUT OUR COMMUNITY

“ We love our history and culture, the peace and nature and the friendliness in our small towns. But we worry about the backward focus, the noise and traffic and the lack of ambition that holds us back.

We have untapped potential and we're down to earth. We want to become examples of healthy 21st century rural inclusive communities.

WHAT WE LOVE

The people, fresh air and the beautiful countryside, our independent arts and culture scene, our history and a real sense of community. People who ask after you and have time to chat. And links to the city and beyond when needed too.

We love our communities and want them to succeed. We've formed groups to think about how we can shape its future, created events to bring people together and listened to others in the hope of creating sustainable rural enterprises and communities.

We're concerned about everyone in our community and it's important that we create an inclusive environment particularly for younger people who we need to listen to and provide better opportunities.

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We want to create an open environment where you can try new things. We want to build a network to create new opportunities, share knowledge and secure investment.

Our towns are friendly places and supportive when you need it. But we need to green our streets and make them more people friendly. We need more cultural events and activities - more street food and arts festivals please.

"Every village will have a small nucleus of people around which the population revolves. Those people work hard physically and put a lot of time into it. The attractions, the distractions - they cut grass like, put out scenery for the drama club.."

"Where are we going to be in 10 years time? Unless we start doing things to make that happen it won't happen"



"There are people who do things on an international stage quietly in their back room or in their shed."

"Some of us would love to see the marketplace pedestrianised and create new experiences in our town centres. Still, despite the success we see elsewhere, it's often met with negativity despite the noise and traffic as people are more interested in preserving the past than creating the future."

"Some of us would like to create more community enterprises whose ethos isn't centred around making money for individuals. It's important they can perform different roles in the community so they can become sustainable."

"There's actually loads of really positive things going on and it's almost like there's so many different groups and people trying to do things that they're overlapping without realising that other people are also trying to do the same thing."

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PLACES WE LOVE

Towns close to home like Alnwick, Corbridge, Harrogate and Saltaire. Further afield the Scottish islands and St Leonards. Cities like Edinburgh, Helsinki, Liverpool and New York inspire us too..

"Corbridge is such a beautiful village - a great place to visit and shop and, aesthetically, it looks beautiful. Prudhoe is never going to be Corbridge, but we can use some of the things they have learnt"

"But being beautiful is not enough. Our towns need to have substance and make the most of our local assets to create a unique experience for locals and visitors."



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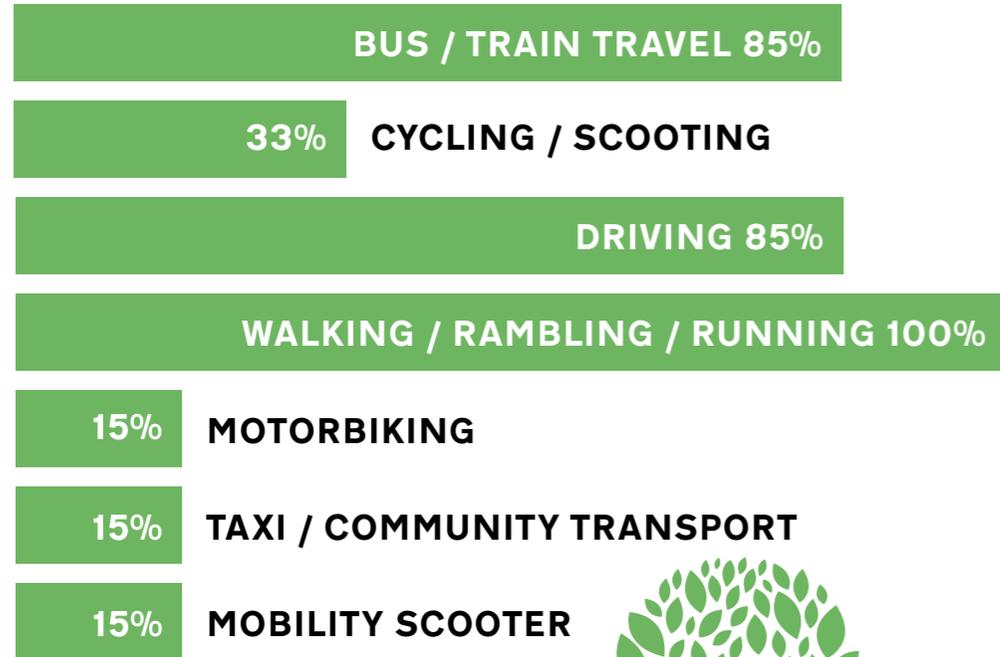
GETTING AROUND



We need all the options to get around, but try to make better choices for our health and the environment. In the countryside, driving is a necessity for many but we'd use public transport if the service was better.

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Ways of getting around that our important to us...



THINGS THAT MAKE US SMILE

“ Waving to neighbours I pass if I am on my bike!”

“Walking along the riverside to Newburn and back. Lovely views across the river Tyne where there are often herons fishing... “Walking along our high street interacting with local business owners”

“The journey from town to the wall, whether walking or driving, is delightful.”

“Sitting in the garden at the end of the day with quiet all around listening to the birds sing, the owls outside keeping me company in the middle of the night and the beauty all around”

“A car gives you independence especially in the countryside where public transport is either non-existent or limited.”



THINGS THAT NEED IMPROVING

Our transport needs to be connected - trains, buses and community services - but 'operators follow rather than create demand'. The bus company should be working with our rail network but more than not they are competing for custom. Later evening services would open up more cultural activities and we have a very good train line that could run more services if the investment was there.

But cars are the obvious way of doing things in the countryside so we have to find a way of coping with them. We should reduce the speed limit on country roads as a minimum and change our priorities around transport - more dedicated cycling routes, safe paths for walking.

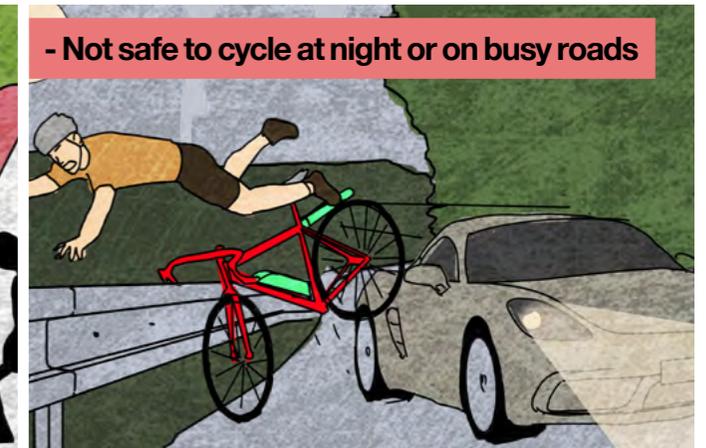
"Public transport has to be the environmental way forward. The investment in resources in cars that stand idle most of the time, and the high number of deaths that result from cars, is ridiculous."

"It was difficult, cold, that we always had the oldest buses and no heating because to use their words 'it wasn't a viable route' - was it any surprise - no one who could drive and had a car which could get them home in half the time, warm, would consider paying more to be on a cold wet bus!"

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BELIEFS ABOUT THE FUTURE

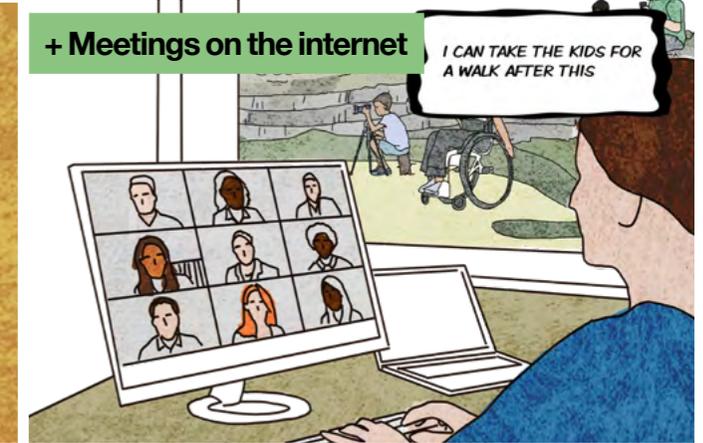
PANDEMIC POSITIVES

We appreciated local services and flexibility, a real sense of community, pulling together to support each other - the way businesses adapted and supported one another.

"Being outside more, getting to know our children and our neighbours. It brought us all closer and everyone looked out for one another. That was a very good thing."

PANDEMIC NEGATIVES

Isolation and the rise in mental and physical health problems - it is going to take a very long time for some people to recover, abandoning buses and trains, the uselessness of the government and politicians, the way we are treating the earth and the fact that we are potentially at risk of more pandemics in the future, swarms of visitors to the woods, the litter and debris that was left, the lack of appreciation people have for rural places..



We need to have the ambition to become a more active town. We need a big drive towards culture and leisure, being out in nature. We need to make our towns more 'experiential' so that people want to come back..

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Things that worried us...

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES

38%

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES LIKE CLIMATE CHANGE

100%

SOCIAL ISSUES LIKE ILLNESS AND ISOLATION

63%

HOW TECHNOLOGY IS AFFECTING YOUR LIFE

13%

THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY AND THINGS LIKE INEQUALITY

87%

"We need to recognise the benefits of clean air and make sure we develop infrastructure to support it - we are not proactive enough about understanding the changes we need to make to be sustainable for the future. There seems to be no joined up thinking in terms of sustainable transport."



"We've built lots of things where access hasn't been thought about properly. We've centralised things more and more and built things where its expedient to build them"

"Economies have changed dramatically, Mining and our town's biggest employer has disappeared. The biggest employer now is the local high school."

"I think there's legislation to make it happen, to source 50% of their services and goods locally but they don't actually do it because they go further afield for cost reasons. The financial side outweighs everything else. Local entrepreneurs could possibly do something to change it through local networks and collaboration."



"What is lacking is action, it's the same with integrated public transport. We know how to do it, we will form commissions, have enquiries and talk about it endlessly, do just about anything but actually practice it. That has to change."

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"Well I'm pleased that we're all concerned about the environment. Hopefully singing from the same hymn sheet .. and I think that means we've got political differences but I think we can overcome that"

"The economic issues and the impact of the pandemic on businesses and life in general.. The changing face of the high street and businesses"

"...Getting on locally. I think there is a disconnect ..."

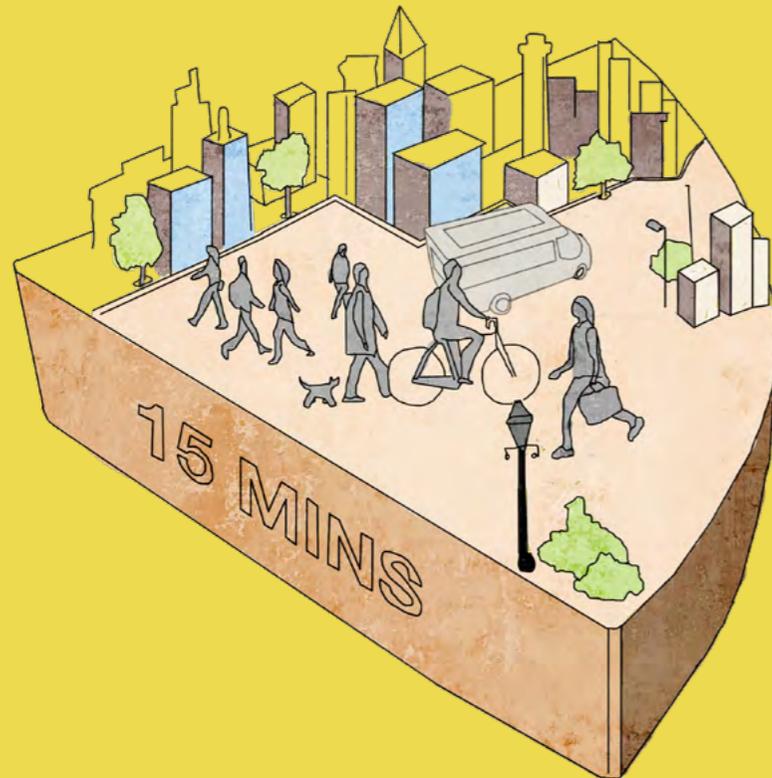


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2. LEARN



WE WANTED TO UNDERSTAND HOW PEOPLE'S FEELINGS WERE REINFORCED OR MODIFIED IN DISCUSSION WITH US AND OTHER ENTREPRENEURS AND USED THE FIRST ONLINE WORKSHOPS AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GO DEEPER INTO THE THINGS THAT PEOPLE THOUGHT AND FELT ABOUT THEIR BUSINESSES, THEIR TOWNS, HOW THEY GET AROUND AND THEIR BELIEFS ABOUT THE FUTURE.

We also used this workshop to understand their feelings towards sustainable place-making and transport as well as the cost of our current lifestyles and risks from the future.

Finally, we asked participants to consider opportunities and challenges around their towns and refine values and principles for their future development.

The entrepreneurs we spoke to are ambitious, naturally collaborative, genuinely interested in place-making and transport issues and want towns to move beyond political differences to build on wider agendas for change. They want to be a test bed for innovative services and new models based on a more experience-based and locally relevant economy.

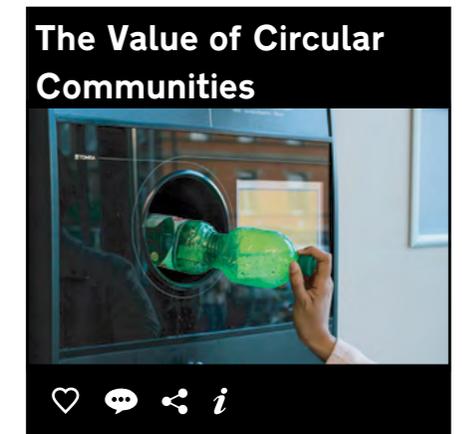
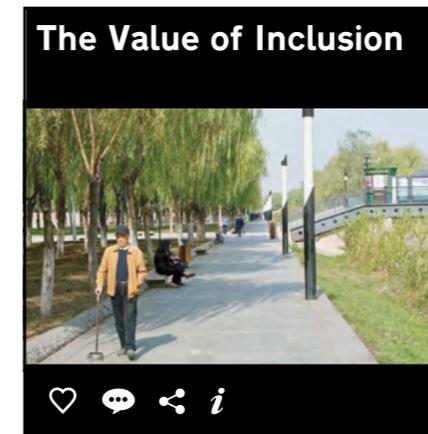
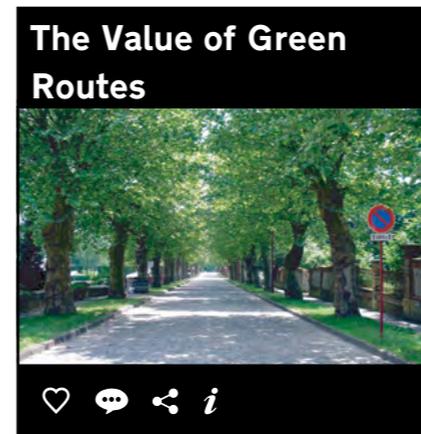
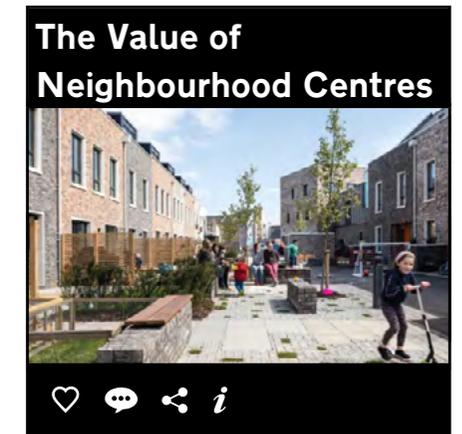
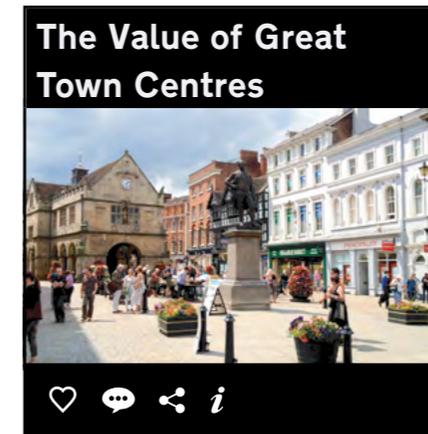
VALUE OF COMMUNITY PLACE-MAKING

We believe that making decisions together is important, coming together for one vision, making decisions collectively. We can't do things individually. Our town and county councils often compete rather than collaborate.

We value great town centres and green spaces. We want inclusive and welcoming environments - a picnic table where you can sit and chat whether you're in a wheelchair, or your elderly or young - to show that we are thinking about everybody.

We value experiences over products Seeing people outside gives a place a holiday atmosphere even if the weather isn't always perfect. But we don't even have pavements in some places!

We need to move beyond politics, focus on taking a lead from the community, using the town's resources to do things together - look at Frome and Stockton - creating a different approach to our towns. Embracing new ideas from other towns. A forum for sharing success and how to make it happen.



But we need funding and investment. We need to combine our ambitions to achieve more. We'd like to be a demonstrator for other rural communities, take best practice and try to make it happen. Build community run enterprises that help everyone succeed.

VALUE OF SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT

We want to see integrated public transport but it needs political will. The government has the perfect opportunity after the Glasgow COP but it's completely out of our hands. And for many of us, cars are not only more convenient, they're cheaper too.

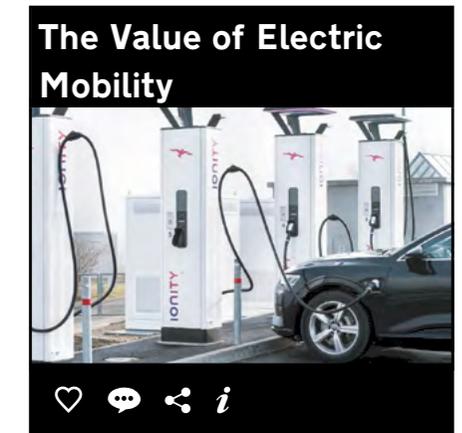
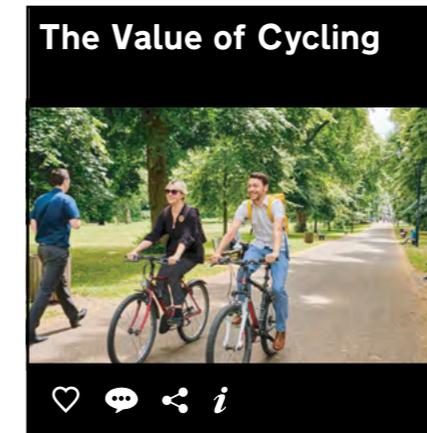
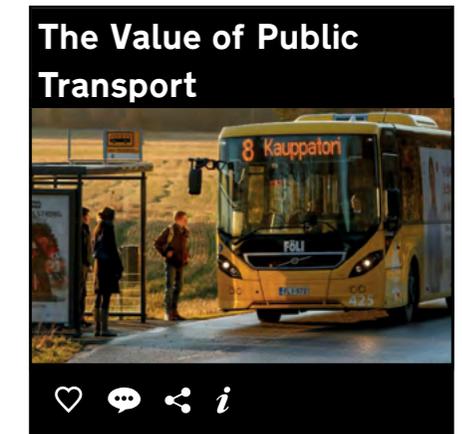
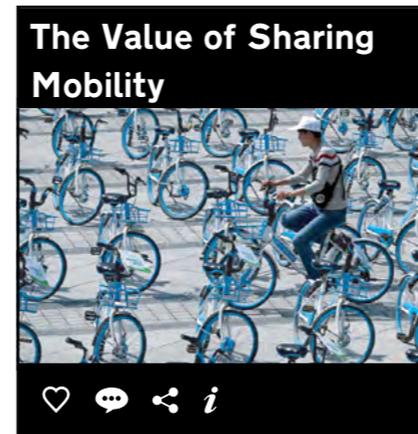
We have to embrace changes even if people feel negatively about it - pedestrianisation, electric bikes, more cycle lanes.

"We need to future proof and get people to think where we are going in ten years time (not what's happening next week or next year). There's a whole education piece that needs to be done there really."

"But some of us still think that more cars means more business, even though "we clearly saw that pedestrianisation works, I mean it's nonsense in a way even to have the discussion. Creating a town that's easier to drive through doesn't mean people will stop. If you are wandering around town, you are more likely to go to shops"



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"At the moment it's slowly going forward with individuals who care enough or who have got enough cash to be able to afford an electric bike or car."

"A lot of people are still cynical. Is it a trend or is it actually a good thing for the planet?"



COST OF OUR CURRENT LIFESTYLES

We worry about our poorer neighbourhoods, we need to invest in them as much as our town centres and think about how buildings can be used in different ways. But these are all the things that, “don’t get counted, things we can’t quantify..”

"The cost of homelessness is greater than the cost of housing people"

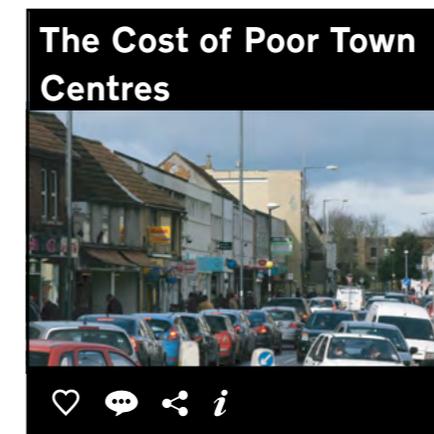
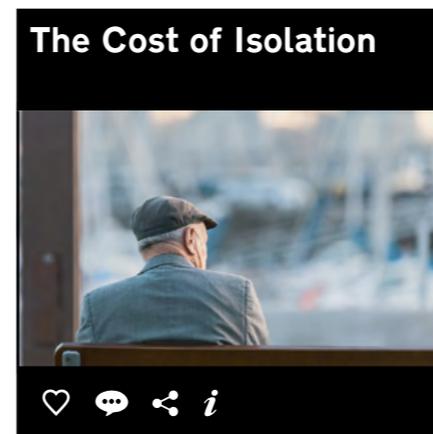
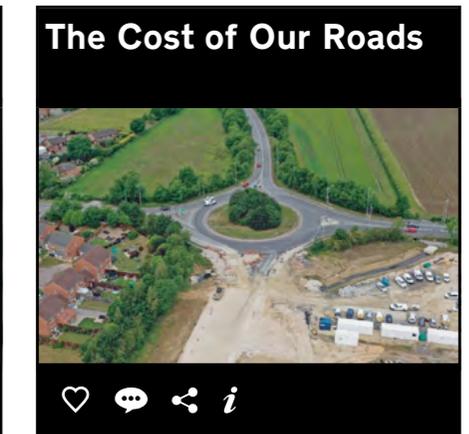
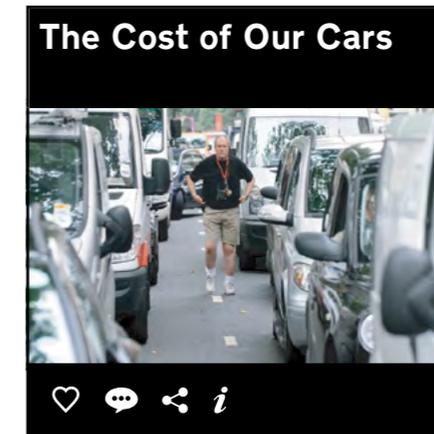
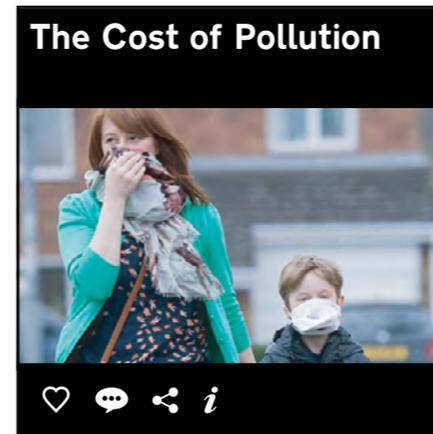
"Nobody wants a 20 million pound roundabout. Was it necessary for Hexham to grow?"

"It's a global political and economic decision that needs to be taken and I think that worrying or thinking that you can have a big impact distracts you from things that you can do at a local level that you can have a genuine effect on."

"There should never be anything done now that has a negative impact on the environment"



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"I like to think about the 80-20 rule, Pareto's principle. Let's find the 20% of things that we can do that deliver 80% of results within our communities"

"Quite often these projects, when planned, make sense but now they might not. Priorities have changed and we often need to re-think them"



RISKS FROM OUR COMMON FUTURES

It's always easier to keep doing what we've always been doing. How can we persuade people to change? Perhaps we have to make our communities accountable for our impact and invest to change things?

But we do need to get people on side - we can't ignore them and that includes the way our councils deal with the problems and their awareness about their own practices.

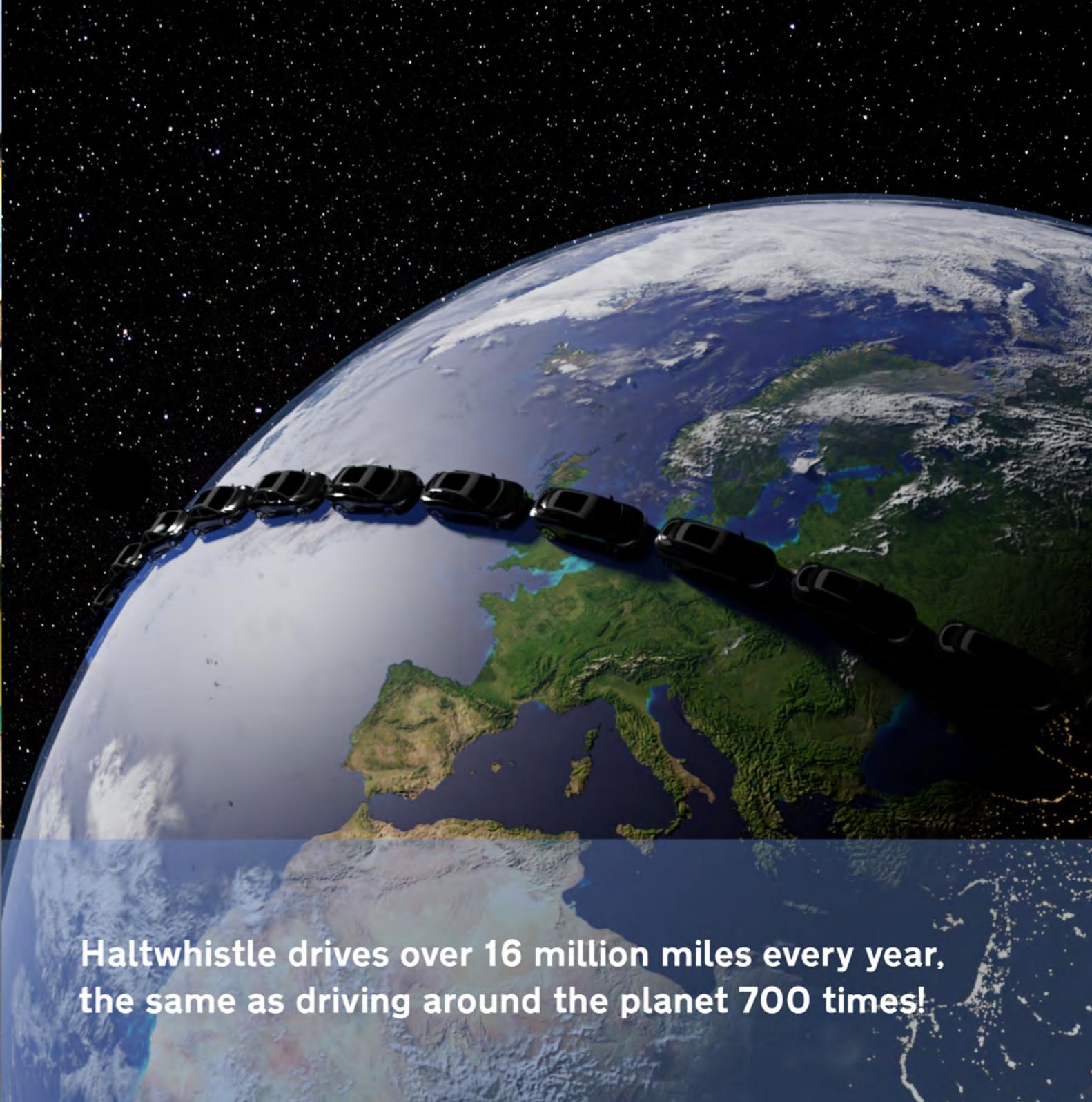
"The town council can try and influence the county and we have declared a climate and biodiversity emergency. We had a climate march on Saturday in the town, you know people are quite active."

"I don't think you can be serious about responses to climate change without those sorts of practical actions that make it easy for people"





Haltwhistle's cars produce around 3,200 tonnes of CO2 emissions per year. That's enough to fill a balloon 150m wide!



Haltwhistle drives over 16 million miles every year, the same as driving around the planet 700 times!

SUSTAINABLE RURAL ENTERPRISES

"I'd really like .. in my work at the council .. to set up social enterprises, to fill in gaps and create opportunities that are not based on profit all the time"

"We've got to teach digital and online skills, have more of a workforce in health and social care, We've got to teach entrepreneurship so we're not relying on businesses that have sustained local areas over many years."

"I'm a massive supporter of digital, I think it is a utility. Fast broadband is vital to rural areas if we are going to regenerate them and encourage people to start a business in this area. Digitalisation is part of the solution."

"There should be an opportunity for communities to offer themselves up as a test bed for new ideas."

"One thing that I find we are lacking.. is a networking space similar to 'we work' but a community run facility, where lots of people who are trying out things, setting up and running businesses...Its run as a community based business with an events space where you nurture young talent to get involved."



Investment in shorter supply chains



Access to high quality broadband



Rural social support system



Skills and training



Workspace



Green alternatives



Young people creating rural enterprises



Working from home



Environmental legislation

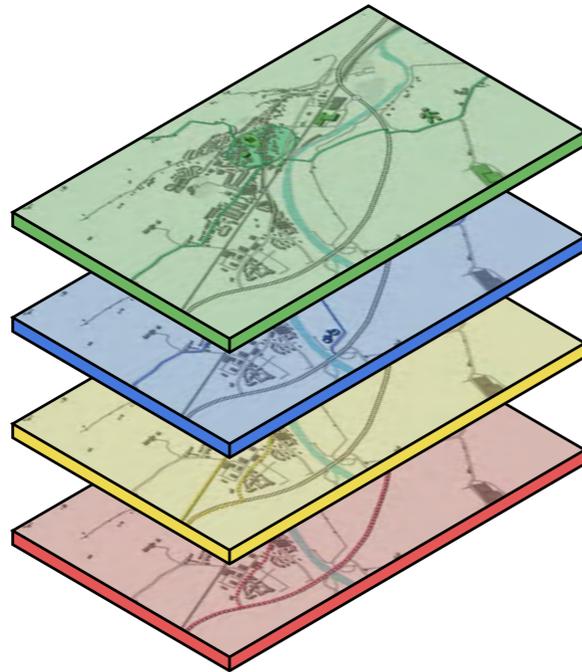


HALTWHISTLE INTERVENTIONS

WE DEVELOPED FOUR DIFFERENT THEMES, GROUPING DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS WITHIN THEM TO FOSTER IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY DURING THE WORKSHOPS.

- Environment, well-being, walking (green)
- Social, inclusion, micro-mobility (blue)
- Cultural, integration, public transport (yellow)
- Economy, logistics, private transport (red)

We used overviews of Prudhoe, Hexham and Haltwhistle to support discussions about the future but have only shown potential interventions in Haltwhistle.



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ENVIRONMENT, WELL-BEING & WALKING

We need to respond to the environmental challenge in many ways. To localise energy production and food networks, to help our green groups with new places for allotments and nature in our towns.

We can put solar panels on the roofs of our industrial estates and take waste heat from one to power a collective endeavour. We need to build on this well-being focus, create places that 'prescribe' well-being for everything from social to mental care. Our businesses can help but we need to connect with our schools, our GPs and hospitals too. We want walkable town centres that link to the network of paths along the Tyne, connecting our towns and up into the hills and beyond to Hadrian's Wall and our heritage, old and new. We need to make sure that walking is possible everywhere and connect our stations to our town centres even if they're at the bottom of the hill.

"I think the health and well-being focus is really quite important .. It's what happens in community centres in Ireland .. we've tried to do things like that with the bakery, but we've never managed to get connected with the social prescribing structure to do it formally."

"We should be growing our own tomatoes and everything else, but you need cheap energy to make that work so - we need to be doing something clever on energy, to make it possible - we could connect with the paper manufacturer and take waste energy off them"



ENVIRONMENT



Make a square into a centre



Make it green



A living street



Add and allotment to grow together



WELL-BEING



Add a park for play & workouts



Turn your GP into well-being focus



Clean it up



Electrify our homes



WALKING



Walkable town centres



Walking from home

ENVIRONMENT WELL-BEING & WALKING MAP

1. Walkable town centres
2. Sign-posted to the slow ways network and the paths along the Tyne and up to the wall
3. A well-being centre integrated into GP and healthcare centres
4. Solar panels on all major roofs
5. Make it easy to walk from the station to the town.
6. Allotments and new growing spaces in unused spaces to encourage new groups



SOCIAL INCLUSION & MICRO-MOBILITY

We have wonderful social networks that came together during the pandemic but we need to build on them as we go forward, connecting to groups - young people and families as well as the old and insecure to make sure they're included in our plans. Perhaps our new hubs can support social events and training so everyone's included?

We can work with our schools and our councils to find space for new activities and new residents too. Convert failing properties into affordable homes rather than build dormitory homes on the edge of our towns.

We've got great cycling networks but they're unsafe and disconnected. We need to take cycle paths through our towns and have safe space for everyone. And we can use micro-logistics to help local shops deliver to people more sustainably.

"As a community, we want all the things that we've lost back again .. we want education, training, skills and adult education."

"Affordable housing for individuals and families- environmentally friendly starter homes for young people above shops"

"Absolutely .. half of our visitors would arrive by bike or on foot and they probably walked from another town or other parts of the Tyne Valley. We need an electric bike and scooter service in the town and increased cycle lanes"



SOCIAL



Start sharing things with our neighbours



A place to play



A place to sit and read



INCLUSION



A starter flat, granny flat or holiday let



Mobility scooter for additional needs



MICRO-MOBILITY



E-bikes for longer rides



A cycle store



Cycle path



Cycle to school

SOCIAL, INCLUSION & MICRO-MOBILITY MAP

1. Convert and update unused property in town into starter homes for young and old
2. Places to meet and chat across the town in squares and pocket parks
3. A protected cycle way through the town, connecting to Sustrans routes and to the local schools
4. A micro-mobility hub at the station including E-bikes, small E-logistics vehicles and mobility scooters for additional needs.



CULTURE, INTEGRATION & PUBLIC TRANSPORT

We need to celebrate our arts and crafts and heritage, to help our creative sector become more connected and visible. We can develop our network of community and maker spaces to celebrate and build on our talents.

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We could have an arts and making centre in each town and a shared cultural programme to bring people together. We need to get the National Parks and English Heritage on board. We need to integrate our services in smarter ways. At the minimum, we need the rail and the buses to work together but really we also need local buses in every town and to connect this to community taxis that can help people get to outlying places. An integrated Tyne Valley travel card that connects culture and transport together?

"I think that one of the bigger issues that some people have in rural areas is the fact that there isn't any public transport at all.... If the two things (train and bus) were tied together effectively then straight away you would make quite a difference and you might encourage more people to use it"

"Hexham's old bus station, which everybody loved and it's now just derelict and it's for sale.. Apparently Beamish offered to buy it..."

"An international design challenge for public art in the town centre and town centre gateway approaches."



CULTURE



Turn your hall into an arts centre



Add some art



INTEGRATED



Create a neighbourhood mobility hub



Town and bus delivery



Get around in the neighbourhood shuttle



PUBLIC TRANSPORT



Future proof rail service



Park and ride for visitors



Social bus stop

CULTURE INTEGRATION AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT MAP

1. A transport interchange at every station
2. Connected community centres that celebrate art and culture
3. A town bus to connect local towns with links to schools, healthcare and heritage too
4. A Tyne Valley Together card that connects transport and culture



ECONOMICS, LOGISTICS & PRIVATE TRANSPORT

We need to bring our centres to life and make them places for people to enjoy. Pop-ups and permanent and attractive market stalls, a better street frontage, a shared vision for what our town centres are for. The future for our towns is independent and thriving, collaborative and not for profit alone.

But to do this we'll have to think about traffic, inclusion and climate change too. We'll have to manage through routes and provide parking a little way from the centre of town. We could support a network of smaller car parks that have e-charging and are secure.

While many of our businesses are smaller and independent we need to work with our chains and our manufacturers. They can help us to innovate, support jobs and livelihoods but they need to contribute to our towns' future too. And we need to deal with empty properties - too many are owned by distant landlords who don't have the town's interests at heart.

"A central (marketplace area) shared working place where freelancers can go and work and collaborate with great wifi and a space for events in the evening/weekends."

"Food based activities can really work in lots of ways (across) a whole range of issues. So it's about a vision for local food production, but getting it up to a scale that's viable and the more collaborative approach to working together."

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ECONOMICS



Community future spaces



Working from home



LOGISTICS



Logistics hub



Autonomous delivery



Slow it down



No through traffic



PRIVATE TRANSPORT



Small shared e-car services



Electric charging



Make a low traffic neighbourhood zone



Restrict parking

ECONOMICS, LOGISTICS & PRIVATE TRANSPORT MAP

1. A market square with permanent stalls and shared workspaces nearby.
2. A logistics hub to manage our growing delivery challenges
3. Pocket parking with E charging around the town and no through high streets to protect our town centres.
4. A Food hub to support local and waste free foods, supported by a community social enterprise.
5. Shared E-car services



FUTURE STREETS

72 **While we received many positive suggestions when we discussed these themes, our visualisations of future streets created more complex responses as participants grappled with the balance between competing interests and the comfort found in the status quo.**

We like the idea of changing our market squares into places for people and reducing through traffic but we can't stop people from accessing their homes or inconveniencing anyone too much. Planning for change isn't going to be easy.

HALTWHISTLE MAIN STREET

"It's great to see the trees and the foliage there, but there's got to be a plan for maintaining them...There is some argument as to who owns the actual market square"



HEXHAM, PRIESTPOPPLE STREET

"I love the greening and pedestrianising but it would be an absolute nightmare, because it connects the east to the west and it's the road that parents use when they're taking children to school....It's a busy through street but there is a movement in Hexham to extend the pedestrian network across the town"

"You could transform the marketplace in exactly the same way without jeopardizing other people doing their day to day business and traveling through the town."

PRUDHOE FRONT STREET

"I like the look of it, I must admit. I like the idea of the bike stands, that's something that we need and I like the green walls above the shops. What do we do about Absentee landlords though?"

"It is something that's been talked about and the problem with that is where the through traffic is going to go... But it is interesting when you do close off the street like that the numbers of people that can then come down and move around freely, without having to worry about the traffic, is quite a sight"



Haltwhistle Futures, Main Street

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Hexham Futures, Priestpople Street

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The Bed and Chair Centre
www.thebedandchaircentre.co.uk
01661 836 959

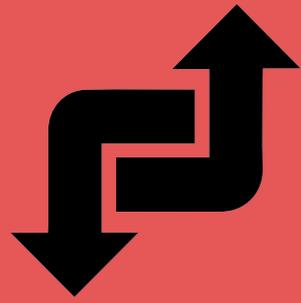
Reflections
LENSES FOR INDIVIDUALS - ENLIGHTEN

Spetchells Centre

TYNE VALLEY TOGETHER
BIKE HUB

Prudhoe Futures, Front Street

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4. CHANGE

WE ASKED PARTICIPANTS TO CONSIDER HOW THEY MIGHT HELP MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN IN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND USED A FRAMEWORK OF TWELVE CHANGE IDEAS TO INFORM THE DISCUSSION.

The twelve themes included creating a shared vision, barriers to change and issues of leadership as well as the ability for communities to prototype change, identifying the community magicians who help to bring people together and the need to generate momentum for change as well as identifying and building on existing community assets.

This activity showed that there was an appetite to collaborate to make change happen, not just within a town but across the wider region, but it also highlighted the challenges of creating a unified and cooperative endeavour.



OPPORTUNITIES

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“ We recognised the benefits - creating a shared ambition, creating links between different projects along the valley. We want to share expertise and tools and we know we’ll speak with a stronger voice, with the power of a collective, when we talk with external partners.

We want to include younger voices and different strands of local life from local youth centres, Tynedale Transformed to the Hexham Debates. If we want to develop a citizen’s forum we could get help from organisations like Leed’s Poverty Truth Commission or the North of Tyne Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change.

Working together can help us to reach other communities, achieve bigger ambitions, avoid reinventing the wheel and learn from each other, integrate projects at a larger scale (transport, energy, broadband) as well as play to our strengths and support each other.



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"You certainly have to inspire the people that live here and will live here, which is why I talk about the children. It shouldn't feel like social engineering, it shouldn't feel like something's being done to them."

"Leadership is interesting because you need people who have a vision.. And there is a difference between leadership and management - Leaders need to be resourced .. it's not sustainable otherwise... Getting people involved, because the big danger is that you end up with one person or a very small group of people taking this on and they get burnt out."

"Putting us in contact with other towns, villages, who have done something similar, who are thinking along the same lines, so you've almost got the support network."

"Identify the funding streams that can support the outline business plan..But the ideas can be a barrier because it is about our hearts and minds"



Visualising a place and mobility opportunity in Haltwhistle:
A makers hub and transport interchange located at a rejuvenated Haltwhistle Station forecourt



CHALLENGES

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“ But despite the enthusiasm to work together and develop a vision, we need to recognise the challenges too.

Even though we want to do this, many things get in our way - personal differences, creating a shared vision or scope that we can all agree on. We feel that we will struggle to create a consensus for change or maintain a position of democratic representation.

And even if we can come together we need to make the time, bring together the skills and get the funding to help us to devise, plan, resource and manage such a major endeavour - goodwill only goes so far. ”

"There needs to be a single focus for a single place and that must have both political power and financial ability.."

"National partners are a nightmare to work with"

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"We can talk forever about dreams, but actually you know if these conversations aren't taking place within places of political power and with people who can put the money in then they're just they're just chats"

"Trickle down (from government) to actual projects .. will be much easier than it is, at the bottom of the pile, trying to...Make things work higher up"

"There are serious legal barriers to integrating public transport at the moment and various talk of those barriers being addressed. There are some things that are not legal barriers but are convenient excuses. It's a good reason not to do something you don't want to do, you can blame it on something"

"Competition .. has failed completely to deliver a decent service .. but that is a political matter."

"There is a mistrust of change and people want to know what change means to me as an individual... What is the cost of change? We talked about electric cars but they are very expensive.."

Visualising a place and mobility challenge in Hexham:
Creating a people-centred and low carbon market square connecting the abbey and the market place





5. TOOLS AND DISCUSSION

THIS PROJECT AIMED TO “DEVELOP NEW WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH RURAL ENTREPRENEURS SO THAT THEY MIGHT PLACE A GREATER VALUE ON THE SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC COSTS OF THEIR CURRENT WORKING PRACTISES AND INCREASE THEIR DESIRE TO FORMULATE ENTREPRENEURIAL RESPONSES THAT HELP TO STRENGTHEN AND SPEED UP THE TRANSITION TO MORE COMMUNITY ORIENTED AND CLIMATE RESTORATIVE APPROACHES TO BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT.”

The response from participants to each stage in the project suggests that there is an appetite to engage with deeper structural changes in our rural towns and enterprises. They saw the need to strengthen the centres of their towns and develop more community-led approaches to economic, health and environmental challenges.

They wanted to see government support for rural public transport as well as safer and more inclusive walking and micro-mobility networks. They recognised that traffic needed to be managed, at least within the centres of their towns, but needed technical support to develop solutions to these issues.

While participants expressed a desire for change, there was recognition that rural entrepreneurs and community partnerships do not have the political or the financial power to implement these changes on their own and many wanted more collaborative approaches that brought together different groups within and beyond their towns to deliver a more inclusive vision and an agreed set of actions. This was not a universal perspective and some participants preferred a less deliberative and more ‘test and prove’ approach that avoided the potential conflicts that come from consensus building.

Despite these genuinely positive responses, the project failed to reach a large group of entrepreneurs and the online tools and workshops did not achieve the same level of engagement that we have seen during in-person workshops. Digital tools helped us to make connections but they don’t provide the tangibility or richness of more hands on and immersive activities.

The [following diagram](#) summarises the activities and outcomes that we aimed to undertake during the project and we set out below insights that might help other rural communities and entrepreneurs work collaboratively to develop a vision for the future of their towns.

LISTEN

“We’d like you to be thoughtful and creative; to think about everyone’s well-being in the future and to help your enterprise and community become healthier, more vibrant, inclusive and resilient.”

Start with an open and positive mission for your project and avoid telling people the answers. Use this phase to understand entrepreneurial philosophies and feelings towards their community and the networks that support their businesses and the wider social fabric in their towns.

Consider alternative ways to collect this information, through, for example, a series of shorter online activities, quantitative surveys or more playful interfaces.

You might develop a more extended ‘entrepreneurial futures’ activity that focuses on enterprise issues such as skills and training, productivity and competitiveness, technology and green economics.

This phase can help you to understand entrepreneurial concerns and challenges as well as their feelings towards place-based and transport issues. It will also uncover opportunities for the future of your communities.



LEARN

Rural enterprise challenges are often separated from wider rural place-making and transport issues and can ignore the costs of our current lifestyles or wider risks from our shared futures.

Our workshops asked participants to consider over 25 separate issues and we could have spent more time diving much more deeply into each of these. In retrospect these learning themes could be turned into a reflective set of activities that could be done at home, but it would require more time on the part of our participants.

This phase aimed to build a better understanding of entrepreneurs' knowledge and attitudes and was used to confirm or adapt their values, key principles that they wanted to include in the future of their communities and businesses, as well as an opportunity to firm up a vision statement and a set of priorities for the future.

It would also be valuable to include 'wild-card' knowledge that allows entrepreneurs to add their own local ingredients to this session and to provide a bridge between local social, environmental and economic data and visualisations that bring these to life in ways that entrepreneurs can engage with more deeply than pure numbers.



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IMAGINE

We used a range of themes to discuss things that entrepreneurs might change in their communities and grouped them into categories that moved away from technical silos like 'transportation' or 'healthcare' or 'net zero'. These thematic bundles allowed participants to make connections between different issues and helped us to create 'layers' of interventions that reflect different spheres of rural life.

This phase asked participants to consider how they could build on existing social, economic and cultural centres and how this might be reflected in future networks and streetscapes. While we did not have time to explore the delivery of rural services in detail it was obvious that many decisions that have been made around rural service delivery (from hospitals and schools to manufacturing zones and new housing) do not align with a vision for strong town centres with locally networked and more collaborative services.

We also found that map-based tools did not draw out creative responses as they tended to lead to point-based 'problems' and 'solutions' rather than considering wider future systems and scenarios.

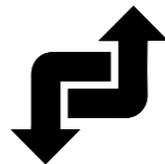


CHANGE

The final activity asked participants to share how they would help make change happen and highlighted a number of opportunities and challenges:

- The need to create a patchwork vision based on multiple inputs (not simply entrepreneurial but with more involvement from young people, families and the public sector).
- The necessity to collaborate beyond individual towns and business sectors to include local and regional government.
- The barriers that central government imposes through poorly thought out support, planning and regulation, as well as those created by land ownership and investment priorities.
- The need to build a dedicated and diverse team to bring a community vision to life.

If these issues can be embraced then entrepreneurs are keen to engage. They are ideally placed to help to develop a local investment plan. They can support a roadmap for delivery that brings together different sectors of the economy and they are in a position to support tactical changes in their towns as well as broader strategic partnerships that can deliver the projects that are needed to help their communities embrace a positive future.



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REFLECTIONS

What did we miss during this project and how might we take this research forward?

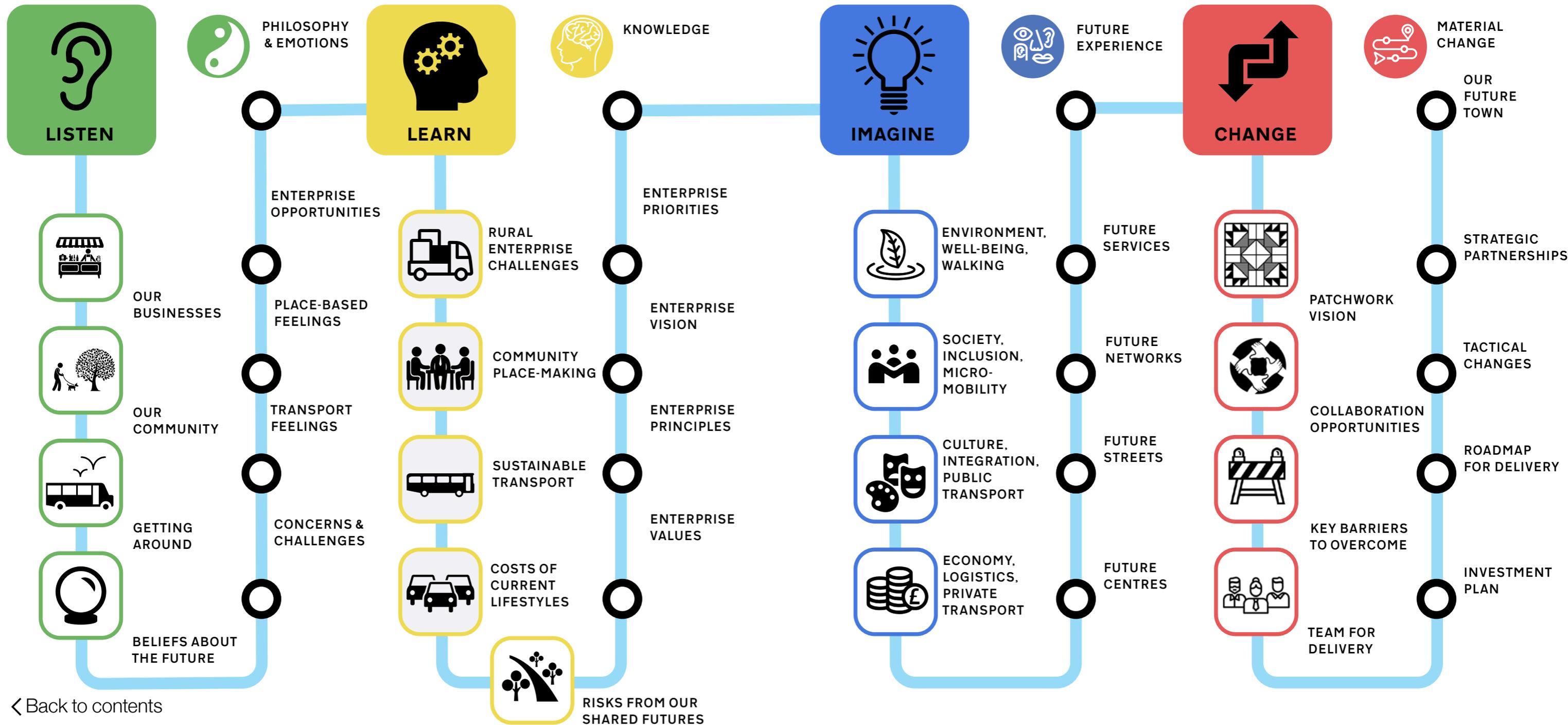
The project didn't focus on activities such as 'investment appraisals', 'predict and provide' or 'big data'. But while these tools help to quantify or prioritise decision-making they get in the way of more creative and exploratory techniques and can deliver a vision that is biased towards normative or short term outcomes.

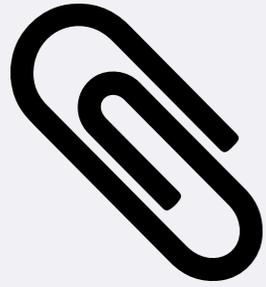
We didn't rely on online mapping or more quantifiable community engagement platforms. But while they have their place, they can be less inclusive and overly analytical, mistaking averages for insights or 'thumbs up' for the greatest value.

On the other hand, we only heard from a small number of entrepreneurs and we did not have the time to debate the most challenging future risks.

This process probably won't predict future pandemics and it hasn't created a comprehensive future vision. But it does show that rural entrepreneurs are deeply engaged with the future of their towns and that these activities support creative thinking and help to engage with entrepreneurial hearts and minds.

TOOLS FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND ENTERPRISES





6. APPENDIX

OUR APPROACH

We worked with our partners to identify and reach out to a cross section of small and medium sized rural enterprise owners in and around the Tyne valley.

We used the Our Future Towns tools (listening, learning, imagining, changing) to engage with these entrepreneurs as community members and business owners in order to understand their underlying philosophies towards their communities and how they make use of social, physical and transport resources within their organisations.

We ran online group activities to share community 'knowledge' and 'change' cards around place-making, transport and well-being in order to understand individual and group attitudes towards the challenges we face and identify how these activities change mindsets and perceptions.

We then ran a follow-on activity that allowed groups to imagine the future of their community - asking individuals to identify changes that they can make to support greater community well-being as well as improved business effectiveness and environmental performance, particularly around place-based and transport issues.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

We will use the findings from these activities to identify the opportunities and barriers that entrepreneurs see and feel around place-making and transport futures and hope to develop a bespoke framework that builds on the Our Future Towns approach so that rural enterprises can better engage with the larger systemic challenges in which they operate.

We brought the opportunities and challenges to life through future mobility and place-making maps and visualisations that show how enterprises and towns like Haltwhistle might change in response.

We will publish the project as a journal article and present it at relevant conferences and will deliver a short non-technical briefing note to accompany the final report.

STATE OF THE ART

This review outlines some of the opportunities and challenges that rural communities and enterprises face. It also considers how place-making and transport planning activities can help entrepreneurs to become more community oriented as well as taking a restorative approach to climate and environmental issues.

Rural communities and businesses have, for a number of years, suffered from issues of peripherality and disconnection. They have also suffered from a degree of pigeon-holing which characterises them as more traditional, slower-paced and less technologically minded.

This is then compounded by the assumption that all rural areas are the same and therefore suffer from similar issues and problems. This mis-characterisation and misunderstanding has often resulted in rural areas being on the receiving end of poor policy making or even benign neglect.

What is needed therefore, and what this project aims to deliver, is an understanding of rural areas as places of opportunity. An understanding of the particularity of place and its relationship to the wider societal changes that are affecting all parts of the country: the climate emergency; an ageing population; rapid technological development; COVID recovery and Brexit.

It is possible to make some high level statements about rural communities and businesses which give an indication of the specific challenges facing them. Rural areas are ageing faster than urban areas, 25.1% of the rural population is over 65 compared with just 17% in urban areas.

104 Since 2002 the average age of those living in rural areas has grown from 42 to nearly 46. In urban areas the change has been significantly less, growing from just 37 to 38 years in the same period. [\(1. DEFRA 2021\)](#)

For the business population there are some similar headline statistics that show the differences between rural and urban business populations. There are more businesses per head of population in rural areas than urban. This is because the majority of rural businesses are micro-businesses.

Rural businesses have a much lower turnover than urban businesses and employ fewer people per business. Home-working and home-based businesses are much more prevalent in rural areas and were even before the COVID pandemic made this a wider population option.

The nature of rural businesses also has secondary effects. Rural businesses are less likely to be growth oriented, to export their products or services [\(2. Phillipson et al. 2019\)](#), to innovate or to invest in digital technologies [\(3. Wishart & Roper, 2021\)](#). By their very nature, rural areas are distant from markets,

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cultural centres and administrative centres. Whilst digital connectivity has ameliorated some of the connectivity issues it remains a significant challenge for rural communities and businesses.

Greater digital connectivity is also something of a double-edged sword. As well as allowing communities and businesses to connect outwards it also brings local businesses into direct competition with global markets.

Organisations including Involve [\(4\)](#) set out a range of participatory methods for community engagement including community appraisals for agenda setting [\(5. Lopez-Escobar et al. 1998\)](#), 21st Century Town Meetings [\(6. Lukenmeyer and Jacobson, 2009\)](#) and Citizen's Jury's for policy making [\(7. Crosby and Hottinger, 2011\)](#), and Citizens Assemblies [\(8. Shortall, 2021\)](#) and Local Issues Forum for decision making [\(9. Becker et al. 2003\)](#). They are based on a variety of participatory practises such as deliberative systems thinking [\(10. Parkinson, 2012\)](#), processes that build on purpose and context to generate inclusive outcomes [\(11. Bickerstaff and Walker, 2001\)](#), as well as the use of digital services to support wider participation. [\(12. Maarit et al, 2019\)](#)

Our approach builds on ideas of leverage points in systems, first expounded by Donella Meadows [\(13. Meadows,1999\)](#), simplified and practised by Christopher Ives [\(14. Ives et al, 2018\)](#) around 'connecting with nature for sustainability' and illustrated

as an iceberg model to explain the depth and importance of hidden factors in complex dynamic systems ([15. Meadows, 2008](#))

It also draws on design theory that sees inclusion and participation as creative activities ([16. Gheerawo, 2016](#)) and recognizes the need for divergent and convergent thinking rather than a linear and didactic process ([17. Design Council, 2007](#)). We are also concerned that participatory design is not purely 'people-centred' but also interested in wider social, environmental, cultural and political systems (18. Gall et al, 2021). We placed local and personal knowledge at the start of the design journey and supplement ideas around verbal deliberation with tools that support imagination and change. ([19. Steen, 2021](#))

While rural entrepreneurs are often categorised as business leaders, they are also, as importantly, citizens and socially minded community members ([20. Varady et al, 2017](#)), particularly in rural areas where they run small businesses in places where they live and have close connections ([21. Korsgaard et al, 2015](#)). This moves them away from being purely sector experts to experts in the economy of their community and potentially leads to greater interest in community led enterprises and actions. ([22. Haugh, 2007](#))

WHO WE LISTENED TO

We were contacted by seventeen organisations engaged in a wide range of activities including agriculture, forestry and fishing; charities or social enterprise; construction; education; health and social service; food, leisure and accommodation; information and communication service; manufacturing; professional, science and technical services; and wholesale, retail or repair services. Most of these businesses were micro enterprises (1-9 employees), with one employing 10-49 people and one 50-249. Charitable or social enterprises included two community partnerships, a community transport partnership and a bakery-based social enterprise.

53% were men, 47% women; 47% over 60, 47% over 46 and only 1 under 45. Age ranges are in line with research on Demographic Ageing and Rural Businesses ([23. Atterton and Thompson, 2015](#)) and confirm that working with entrepreneurial voices alone reduces the participation of younger people within rural communities. The percentage of women entrepreneurs involved is significantly higher than national averages and may indicate a greater interest in the issues raised in our call to action. ([24. Rose, 2019](#))

Of these 17 organisations, 13 people shared detailed responses on what mattered to them and 12 joined our online workshops.

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Intelligent Mobility Design Centre

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File reference: OFT_Engaging_Enterprises_final, 10/01/2022

Visualising a place and mobility opportunity in Prudhoe:
Creating a community food hub in the Wylam pumping
station connecting with different mobility options





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OUR FUTURE TOWNS
COMMUNITY PLACE MAKING AND TRANSPORT PLANNING

