ENGAGING RURAL ENTERPRISES IN COMMUNITY PLACEMAKING AND TRANSPORT PLANNING

Dan Phillips

Innovation Fellow, Intelligent Mobility Design Centre, Royal College of Art

1. Summary

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

Rural entrepreneurs in and around the Tyne Valley share environmental, social and economic concerns and have overlapping visions for a future.

These are based on community and kindness, hard work and passion, as well as a value inherent in people's wellbeing, restoration of nature and protection and development of a 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 to 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 buildings 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 remain important for rural communities but they no longer want them to dominate their towns.

Despite these aspirations, entrepreneurs don't have the knowledge or experience to achieve these goals alone. There's a lack of trust in developers, landowners and larger businesses (often remotely owned) so 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. Not every entrepreneur recognises the urgency for radical change, but they don't want special interest groups or individuals to dominate decision making about their shared future.

The tools that we used in this project served the purpose of collecting perspectives and stimulating 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

skills can complement other quantitative and deliberative engagement techniques that are available today.

Thanks to the entrepreneurs of Northumberland and our partner organisations for supporting this design research:

- 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

2. Introduction

2.1. Context

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 wellbeing 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 will be 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.

2.2. 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[1] (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 organisation.

We ran online group activities to share community 'knowledge' and 'change' cards around placemaking and wellbeing 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 allows groups to imagine the future of their community - asking individuals to identify changes that they can make to support greater community wellbeing as well as improved business effectiveness and environmental performance, particularly around place-based and transport issues.

2.3.   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 pigeonholing 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 mischaracterisation 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. 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.[2]

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. Homeworking 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[3], to innovate or to invest in digital technologies[4].

By their very nature, rural areas are distant from markets, 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[5] set out a range of participatory methods for community engagement including community appraisals for agenda setting[6], 21st Century Town Meetings[7] and Citizen's Jury's for policy making[8], and Citizens Assemblies[9] to Local Issues Forum for decision making[10]. They are based on a variety of participatory practises such as deliberative systems thinking[11], processes that build on purpose and context to generate inclusive outcomes[12], as well as the use of digital services to support wider participation.[13]

Our own approach builds on ideas of leverage points in systems, first expounded by Donella Meadows[14], simplified and practised by Christopher Ives[15] 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[16]

It also draws on design theory that sees inclusion and participation as creative activities[17] and recognizes the need for divergent and convergent thinking rather than a linear and didactic process[18]. We are also concerned that participatory design is not purely 'people-centred' but also interested in wider social, environmental, cultural and political systems[19]. We also place local and personal knowledge at the start of the design journey and supplement ideas around verbal deliberation with tools that support imagination and change.[20]

While rural entrepreneurs are often categorised as business leaders, they are also, as importantly, citizens and socially minded community members[21], particularly in rural areas where they run small businesses in places where they live and have close connections[22]. 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.[23]
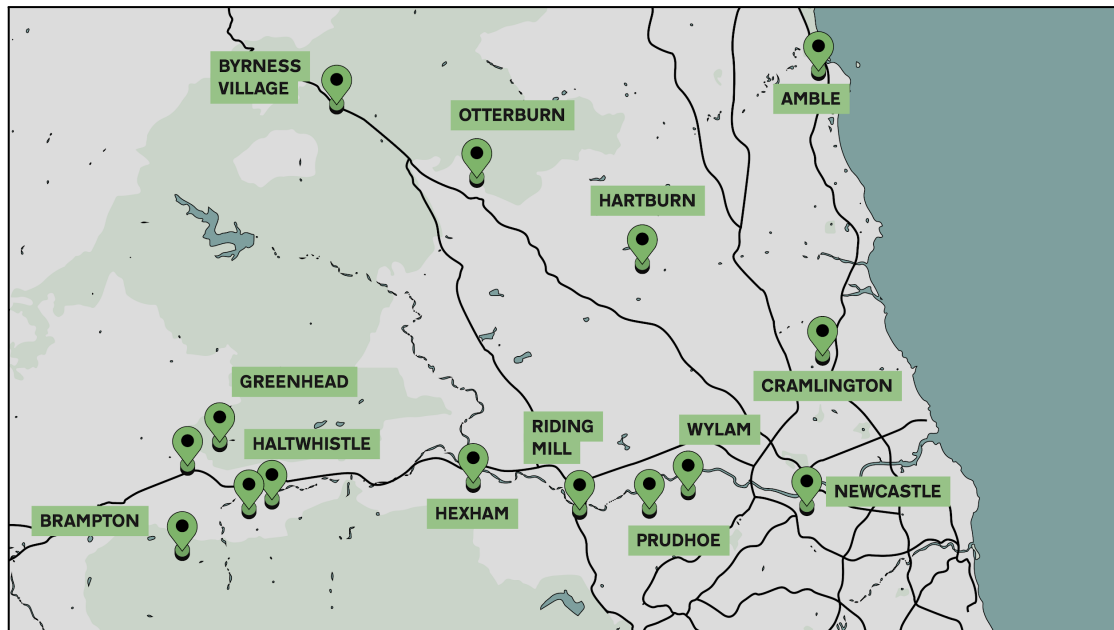
2.4.   Who we listened to

Fig 1: Location of entrepreneurs who took part in the project

We were contacted by 17 organisations engaged in a wide range of activities including Agriculture, forestry and fishing; Charity 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 1 between 26 and 45. Age ranges are in line with research on Demographic Ageing and Rural Businesses[24] and confirm that working with entrepreneurial voices alone reduces the participation of younger people within rural communities. The percentage of women entrepreneurs is significantly higher than national averages and potentially shows that women have a greater interest in the issues raised in our call to action.[25]

Of these 17 organisations, 14 shared detailed responses on what mattered to them and 12 joined our learning together online workshops.

2.5.   Team

Principal Investigator: Dan Phillips, Royal College of Art

Co-Investigator: Dr Paul Cowie and Adrienne Attorp, Newcastle University

Design Research Associate: Joseph Zammit, Royal College of Art

3.   What we learnt

3.1.   Listen to each other

We listened to 14 entrepreneurs and community leaders, representing both for profit and social enterprises, working in and near the Tyne Valley. This section summarises what we heard via a survey together with online conversations about their shared perspectives.

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.

Their businesses included hospitality and tourism, eco-products, food, beverage and manufacturing and they had expertise in infrastructure development, media, communications and partnership building - so a diverse and creative jury that represented a range of views and local knowledge and skills.

Their towns have deep roots in local history. They've been shaped by religion, trade, political protest and the industrial revolution and the community and these forces have helped to create towns that are loved by many and considered to be some of the happiest places to live.

But while these are attractive towns, they are not sustainable in their current form.

Fig 2: The disconnect: Impact of transport and the local opposition to pedestrianisation by traders in Hexham

In transport alone, haltwhistle residents drive 16 million miles a year, at a cost of £10 million pounds, and each community would need to plant a forest the size of their town every year just to offset emissions from their cars.

Previous attempts to create change have led to traders and developers blocking plans for change - despite the benefits that they might bring. Are we planning and consulting in the right way or are there different approaches that we need to take?
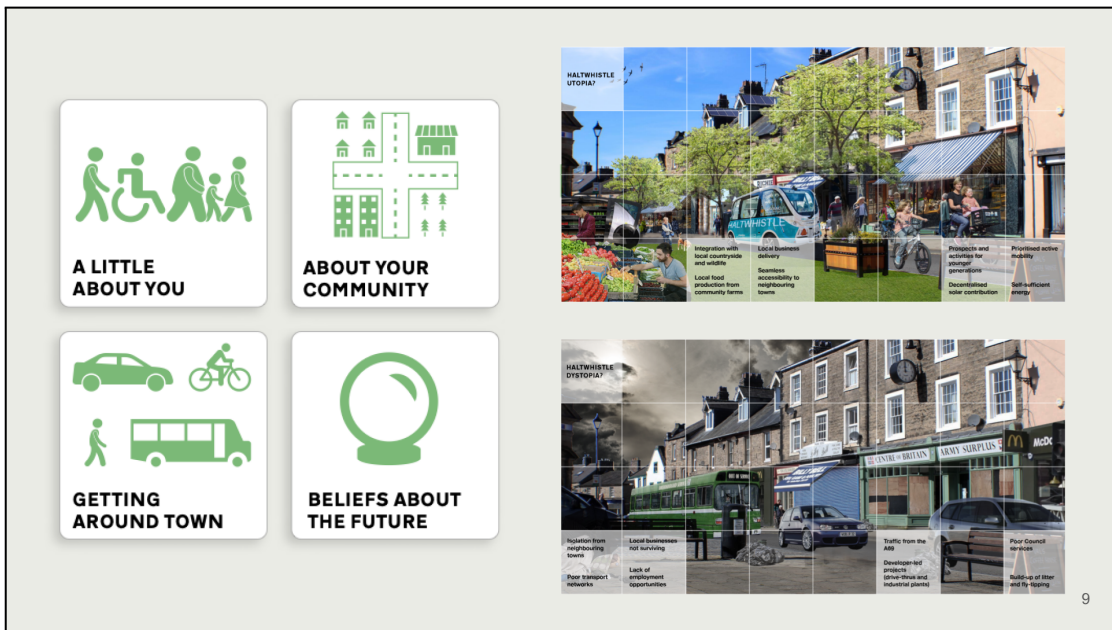

Fig 3: Survey and workshop themes together with images of Utopian and Dystopian futures based on hopes and fears from Our Future Towns

To support the project we used online surveys to understand entrepreneurial values, together with their feelings and knowledge about their towns and the wider region. And we held workshops to share this knowledge and discuss issues together rather than treating it as 'data' for interpretation by specialists.

Entrepreneurs shared common values including a sense of community, helping others and kindness. They valued hard work, passion and a drive to succeed founded on a friendliness at the heart of a rural life.
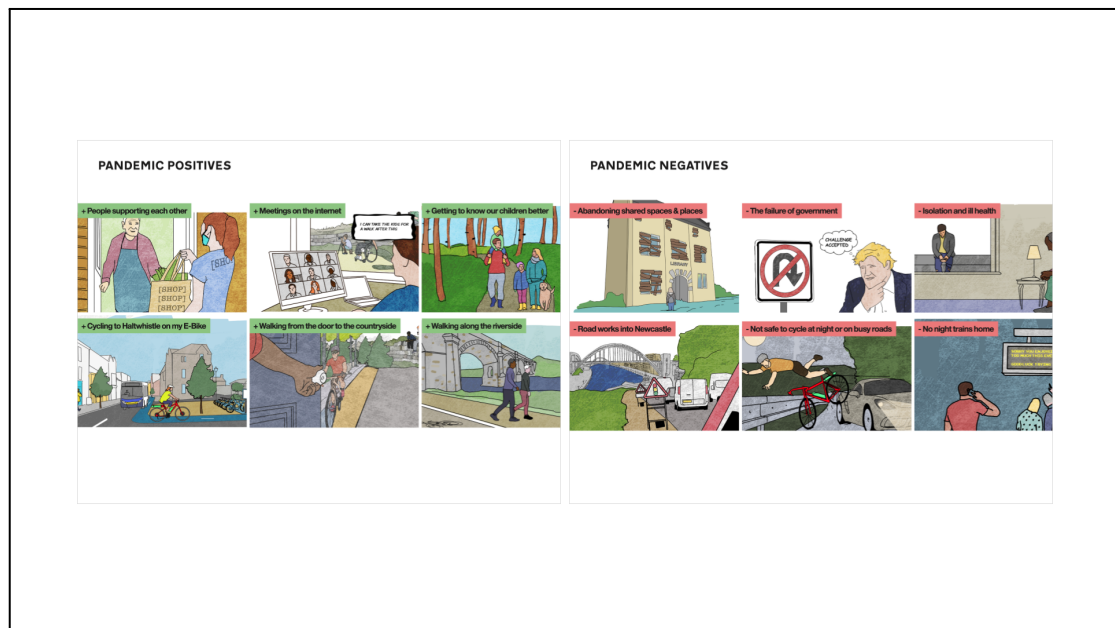

Fig 4: Visual summary of entrepreneurs' pandemic positives and negatives

We heard some of the pandemic positives - the way people supported each other, time to spend with their families and the benefits of digital services - when they worked. They all appreciated the value of staying local, travelling less and enjoying the connection between town and countryside.

The negatives included a loss of shared space, perceived failures in government and the isolation and illness that lay at the centre of the pandemic. They highlighted a range of transport concerns from roadworks and traffic, to the dangers of rural cycling, inadequate public transport and poor connectivity between towns and urban centres.
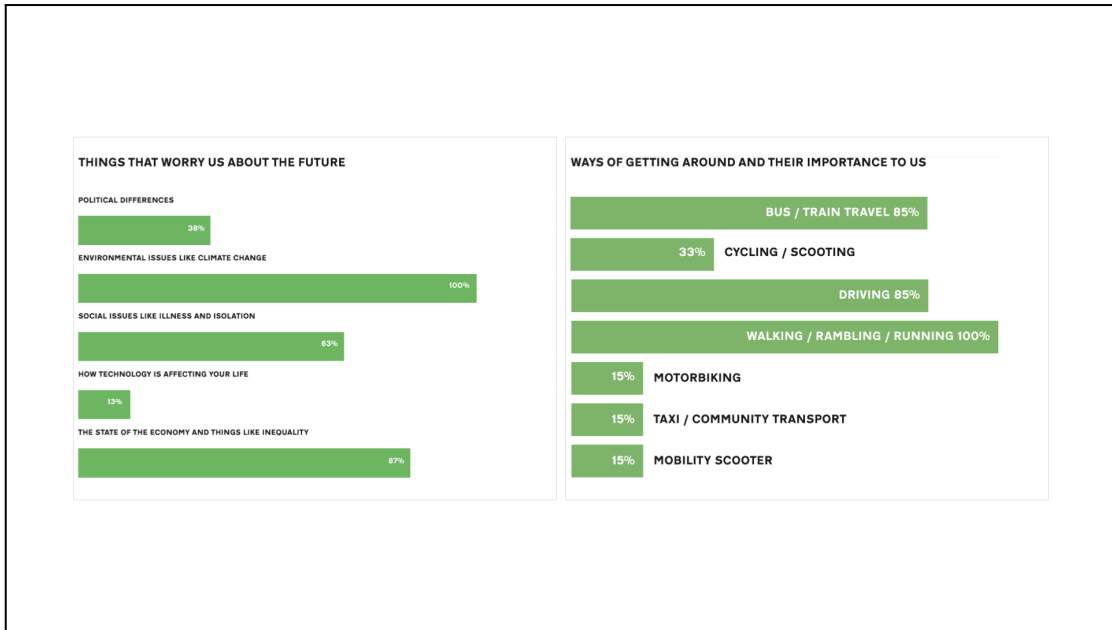
Fig 5: Things that worried entrepreneurs and the importance of different transport options

They were united in their concern for environmental protection as well as the impact of the pandemic on the rural economy. Many were concerned by social issues in their communities and a significant minority saw political difference as a barrier to change.

On the positive side, they saw new technologies as enablers and something that rural communities needed to engage with more creatively. From a mobility perspective, they valued walking and direct access to their towns; felt that public transport was as important as the car and bemoaned the lack of government support that's seen a steady decline in rural train and bus services. And even though cycling is a minority activity in rural areas, a significant number were keen to see a better cycle network and more support for micrombility generally.

3.2.   Learn together

Together, entrepreneurs had a clear vision for the future of rural towns. They wanted town councils, public bodies and independent businesses to work together to support thriving town centres that aimed towards greater levels of self-sufficiency and inclusion.

To achieve this they wanted 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 didn't want private vehicles to dominate their towns or the way we plan for the future.
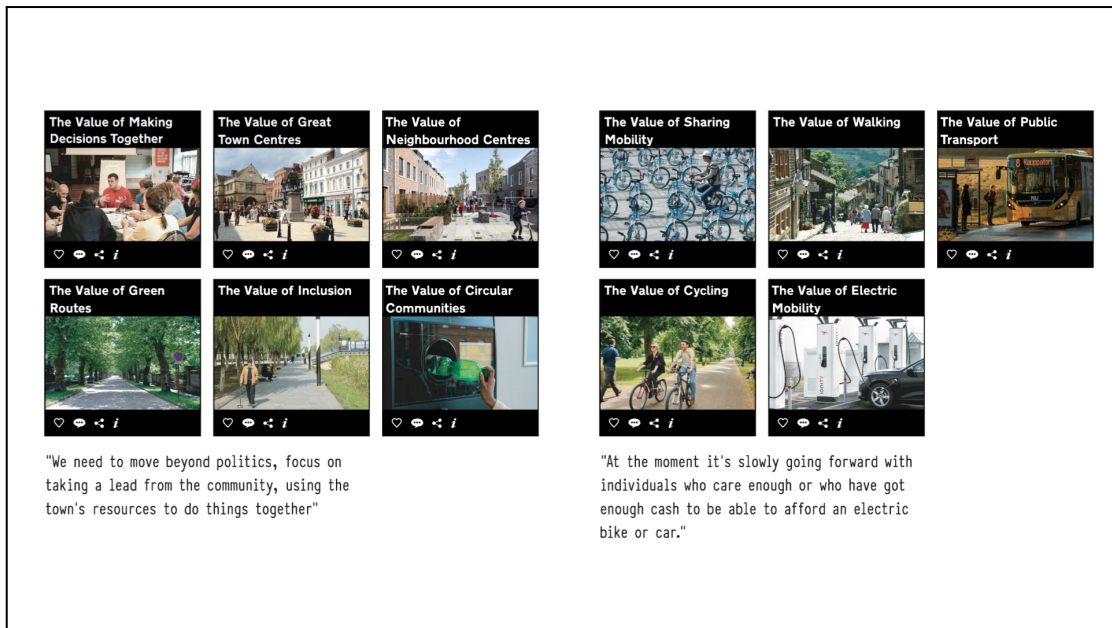
Fig 6: The value of place-making and sustainable transport. Two of the themes that we used to discuss the future of their towns.

During our first workshop participants responded to issues around sustainable place-making by asking that communities come together to create a shared vision and find ways to make creative decisions collectively. They couldn't understand why, for example, the obvious benefits of vibrant town centres were being destroyed by thoughtless planning. "Why is this even being questioned?", was a common refrain

As one participant said, "We need to futureproof and get people to think, "where are we going in ten years time - not what's happening next week or next year." To do this we need to move beyond politics, take a lead from the community and use the town's assets to do things together.

And whilst they were keen to see the greening of transport and the need for public provision, they felt that the government was not delivering any rural support and it was down to individuals who had the money or the motivation. It was obvious that this wasn't going to be enough to make the changes that are needed.

They saw the costs of our current lifestyles as things that were not counted or measured properly by central government or by society more widely. But they were unsure how communities could engage with these challenges on their own. There's a big gap between ground up aspirations and top down delivery that needs to be filled.

When it came to wider risks from the future they made the point that, "I don't think you can be serious about responses to climate change without the practical actions that make it easy for people". We're expecting change to happen through the magic and invisible hand of the marketplace or through dictat from an expert. But the market is not necessarily aligned with the needs of rural communities or to complex

long term demands and experts don't always communicate in a language that people understand.

From an entrepreneurial perspective, many of our business leaders wanted to help young people get involved in the future of their towns and they wanted support so they could test out new ideas. Community partnerships have tried to set up eco-shops, recycling schemes, car clubs and shared e-bikes, but there was little joined-up support to make these schemes sustainable.

3.3.   Imagine the future

Our second workshop asked participants to imagine their future towns, asking them to reflect on their shared concerns and values - then use maps and views of future streets to discuss opportunities for making change across their towns and the wider region.

Fig 7: Future street views used to help entrepreneurs imagine the future of their towns

We shared 'future street views' that encouraged participants to reimagine their town centres. We wanted to know how these illustrations reflected or jarred with their vision for the future and used their responses to understand how easy or difficult it might be to affect change.

In Hexham, entrepreneurs wanted to see how their former high streets might adapt as more shopping happened online - could streets become more pedestrian friendly, could shops be converted into homes and how might smaller shared vehicles deliver improvements to their quality of life?

While we received positive suggestions, these visualisations created a complex set of responses as participants grappled with the balance between competing interests and the comfort found in the status quo. Our entrepreneurs like the idea of change but couldn't collectively imagine how this could be done without inconveniencing people too much.

Some were adamant that transformation needed to happen but they were clear that many landowners, politicians and business leaders were more interested in today than in supporting long term change. While maps don't necessarily support holistic thinking - and we found that they were not easy things to use as a discussion tool - we used thematic layers to encourage a variety of thoughtful and creative responses.

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

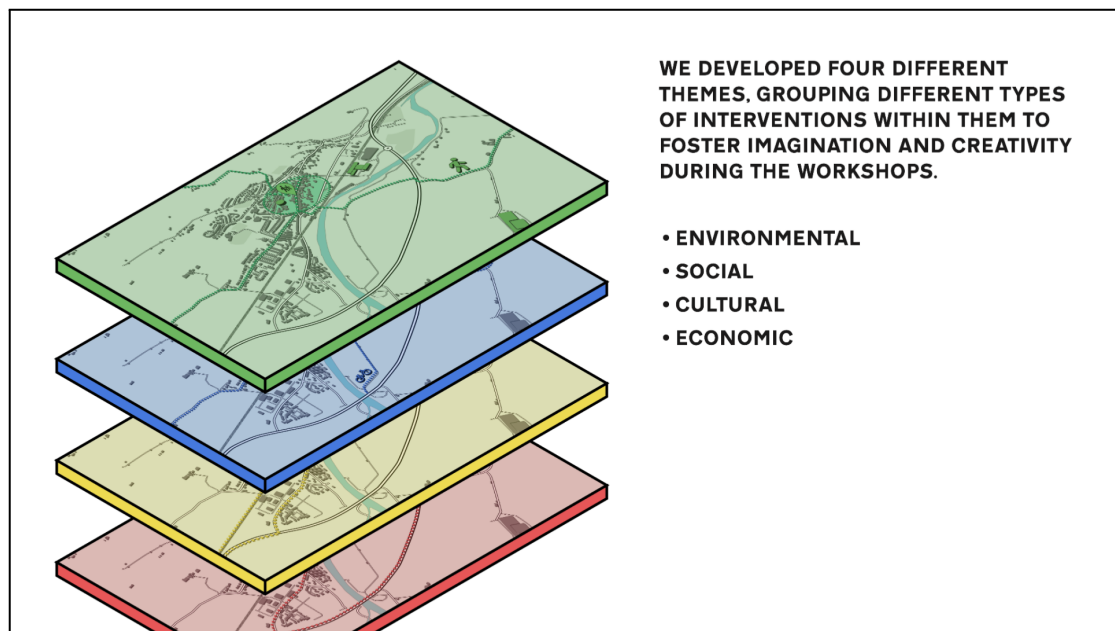- ENVIRONMENTAL
- SOCIAL
- CULTURAL
- ECONOMIC

Fig 8: Four place and transport related themes used to discuss the future of Haltwhistle from a map-based perspective

We developed four themes to discuss the future of their towns integrating wider environmental, social, cultural and economic issues with a range of mobility and place-based challenges.
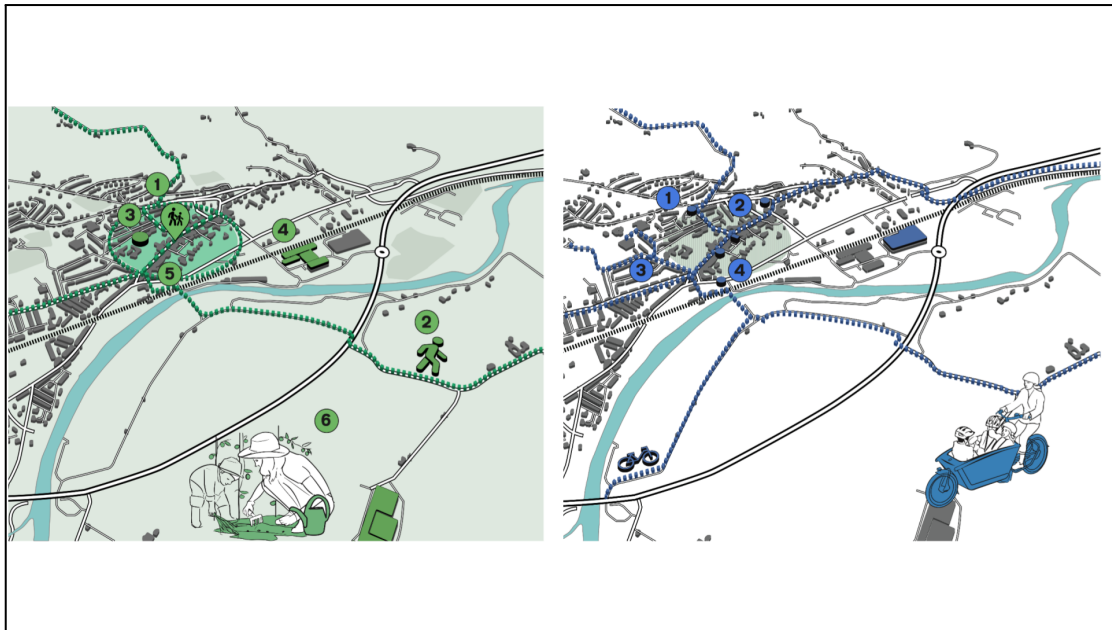
Fig 9: Mapping possible change in Haltwhistle through walking, wellbeing, environment and micromobility, inclusion and society

In the environmental theme, we helped people create connections between wellbeing, nature, walking and environmental protection. They imagined a wellbeing centre in every town, walking routes that transformed town centres, community owned renewable power integrated with housing, public and industrial buildings, and green spaces that encourage new groups to develop an interest and passion in nature through shared allotments and pocket parks.

The social theme identified a need for greater levels of inclusion and safety in our towns. People wanted to repurpose unused buildings to provide more affordable housing, create mobility hubs that would encourage people to get around in healthier ways and extend cycle routes through every town centre, passed every school and between nearby towns along safe and quiet lanes.

The culture theme built on interests in the arts with creativity hidden in garden sheds and community halls. With support it should be a major element of rural social and economic life. They imagined how a network of places and activities could be connected through a joined up transport system and we discussed the idea of creating a 'Tyne Valley Together" card that links culture, nature and public transport through a community platform and online resource.

The idea of doing things together and at scale is one of the big opportunities that this project highlighted and one that is hard to achieve without regional support.

The economic theme asked that towns focus on their centres, moving away from the out of town business parks that destroy the life of smaller communities. They wanted to see a better way of managing logistics, providing a hub for each town that helps to

manage goods in a smarter way. And they wanted to move away from street parking and large central car parks - perhaps by providing smaller and more decentralised pocket car parks that support a shift to E-charging and protect town centres from unnecessary traffic.
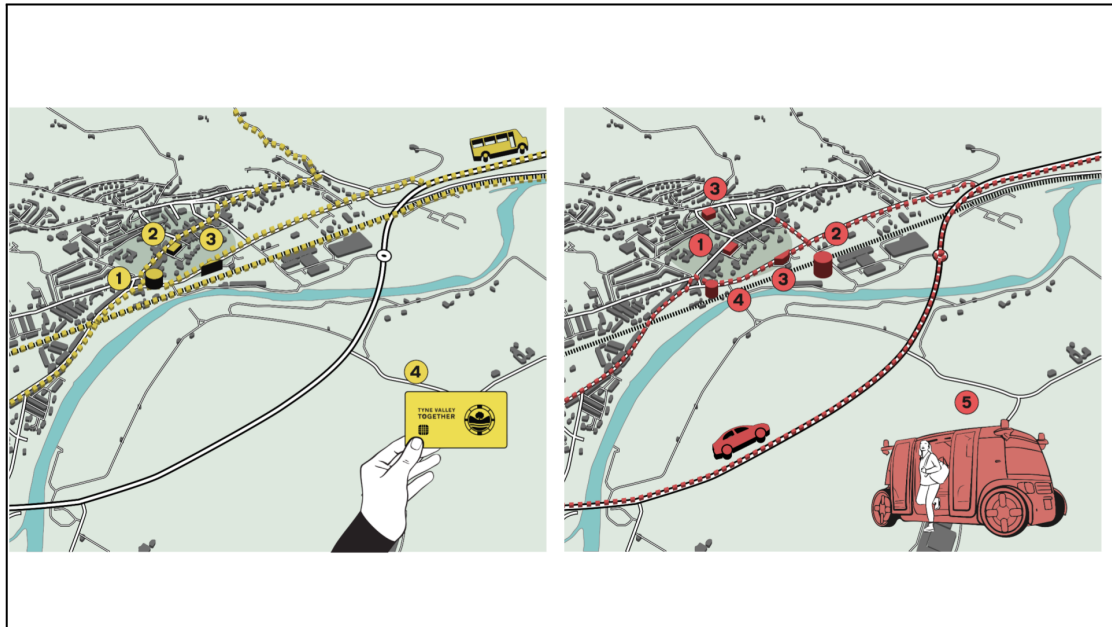

Fig 10: Mapping possible change in Haltwhistle through public transport, integration, culture and private transport, logistics and the local economy

This mapping process identified around 20 interventions that could help rural towns develop their community and their vision. They connect with the government's levelling up and decarbonisation agenda and with the desire for community participation but how will they be funded, or will they be rejected by 'business as usual' voices? Voices that now say that levelling up is achieved through a focus on 'world beating technologies' and 'regional economic hubs' that create a demand for UK PLC.

3.4.   Making Change

For the final stage in this project, we asked entrepreneurs how to make change happen. We offered a twelve step programme as a starting point and asked participants to let us know the opportunities and the barriers to change.
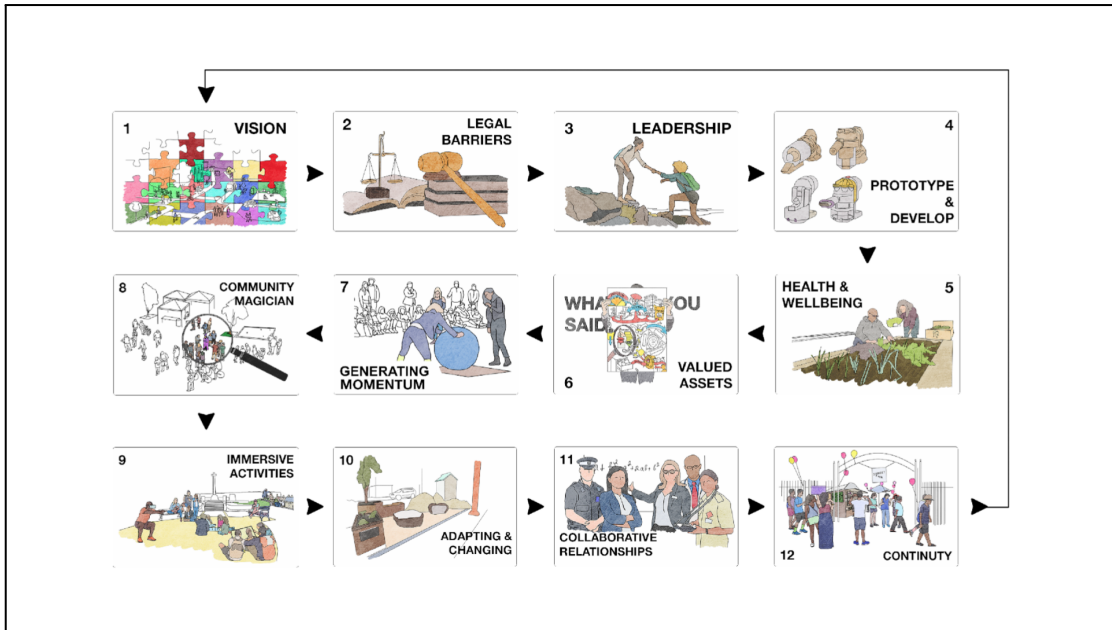
Fig 11: Twelve steps to make change happen.

They recognised the benefits - creating a shared ambition, creating links between different projects along the valley. They wanted to share expertise and tools and speak with a stronger voice, with the power of a collective, when they talked with external partners.
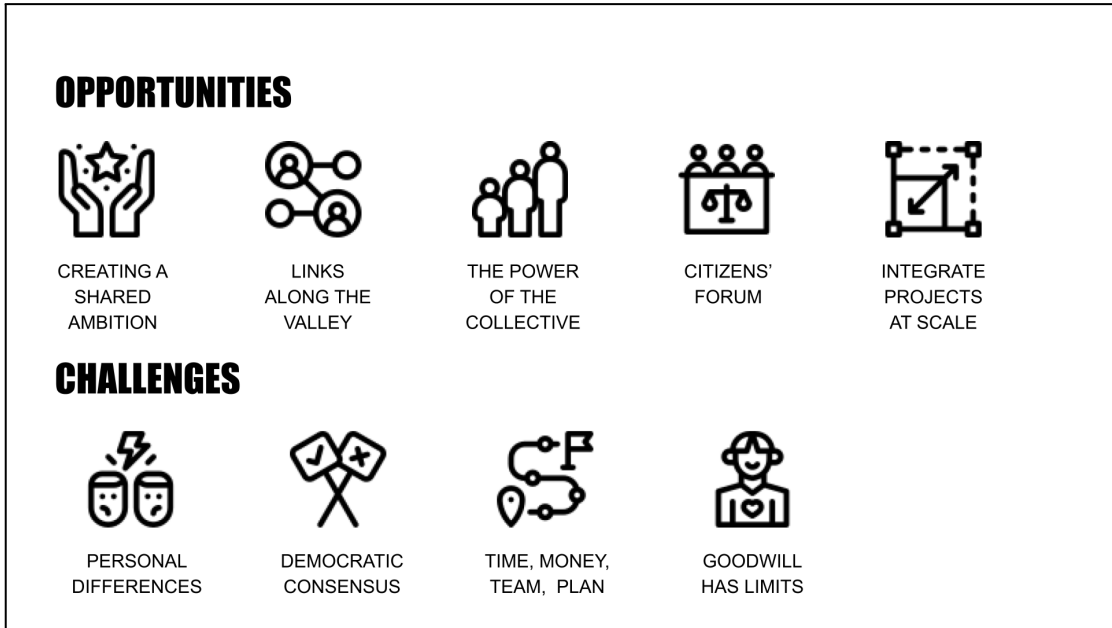

Fig 12: Opportunities and challenges associated with making change along the Tyne Valley

They wanted to include younger voices and different strands of local life and saw the opportunity of developing a citizen's forum to guide their towns towards their goal. They wanted to achieve bigger ambitions, avoid reinventing the wheel and learn

from each other, and recognised that integrating projects at a larger scale would play to their strengths and help towns support each other.

But despite the enthusiasm to work together, they recognised a number of barriers to change - from personal differences and the challenge of creating a shared vision and scope to the struggle of creating consensus or maintaining democratic representation. And even if they could come together they need resources to plan and support a major transformation at scale. They may have the skills but goodwill only goes so far.

4. Making Change

Our project aimed to "develop new ways of engaging with rural entrepreneurs so that they might place a greater value on the costs of current working practices and increase the desire to formulate entrepreneurial responses that speed the transition to more community oriented and climate restorative approaches to business and rural development."
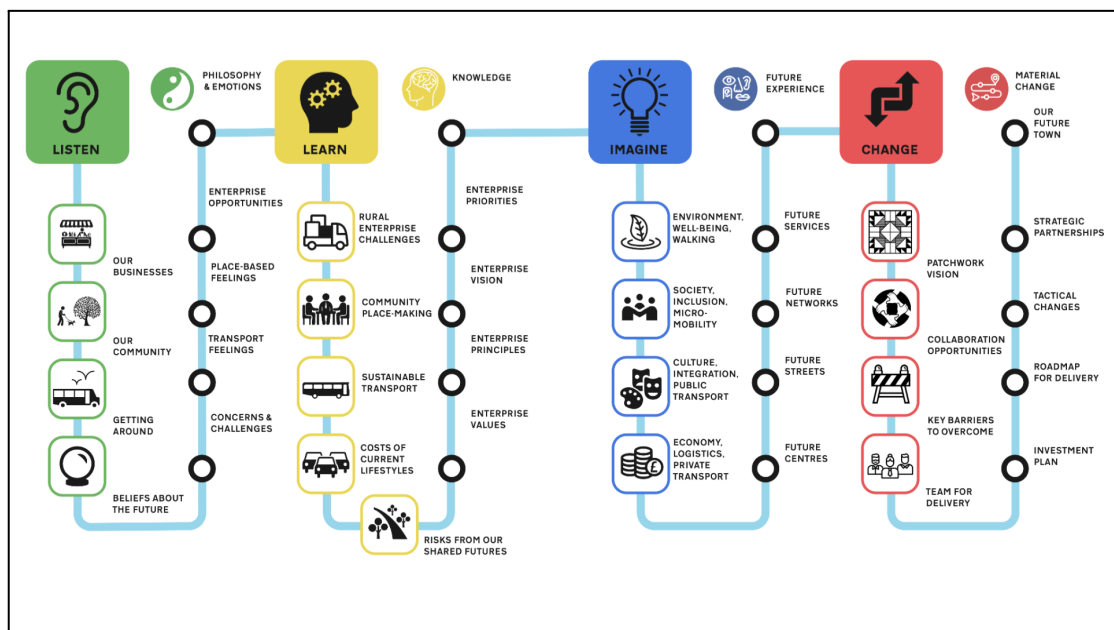

Fig 13: A set of activities and process that might help entrepreneurs and local authorities engage in collaborative place-based and transport planning

To support the research we followed a series of activities and methods, running them online, which has its challenges compared with in person design research, and using insights from our conversations to develop design responses to support deeper conversations.

In the listening phase we wanted entrepreneurs to share their philosophies and feelings towards their community and the networks that support their businesses and the wider social fabric in their towns.

In the learning phase we steered away from siloed 'business challenges' and asked participants to engage with wider rural place-making and transport issues including the costs of our current lifestyles and the wider risks from our shared futures.

We used a range of themes to help people discuss the future of their towns, and the thematic bundles helped to create connections between different issues and develop 'layers' of interventions that reflect different spheres of rural life.

The final activity highlighted the challenge of creating systemic change in rural communities. People have the vision to imagine their future together but there are significant political, economic and cultural barriers that stop more creative and inclusive development from taking place.

Fig 14: Visualising future transport hubs and town centres to support shared vision-making activities

We can imagine and visualise a future network of rural public transport that brings people together through shared hubs and mobility services and we can visualise market squares that are designed with people to bring life into the hearts of our towns

Fig 15: Visualising future community assets to support shared vision-making activities

And we can develop a vision for repurposed community assets that form the centre of thriving rural enterprises, But this radical change will only happen with joined up and creative thinking that engages with entrepreneurs and with the wider community.

5.   Notes

1. Phillips, D., 2021. Our future town: changing hearts and minds policy research.

2. DEFRA Statistical Digest of Rural England – July 2021

3. Phillipson, J., Tiwasing, P., Gorton, M., Maioli, S., Newbery, R. and Turner, R., 2019. Shining a spotlight on small rural businesses: How does their performance compare with urban?. Journal of Rural Studies, 68, pp.230-239.

4. Wishart, M. & Roper, S. (2021) Digital adoption in rural SMEs NICRE Research Report No 3: Newcastle

5. https://www.involve.org.uk/

6. Lopez-Escobar, E., Llamas, J.P. and McCombs, M., 1998. Agenda setting and community consensus: First and second level effects. International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 10(4), pp.335-348.

7. Lukensmeyer, C.J. and Jacobson, W., 2009. The 21st century town meeting: Engaging citizens in governance. The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems: Easyread Super Large 24pt Edition, p.320.

8. Crosby, N. and Hottinger, J.C., 2011. The citizens jury process. The Book of the States, 2011, pp.321-325.

9. Shortall, R., 2021. Deliberative appraisal methods. In Advances in Transport Policy and Planning (Vol. 7, pp. 51-82). Academic Press.

10. Becker, D.R., Harris, C.C., McLaughlin, W.J. and Nielsen, E.A., 2003. A participatory approach to social impact assessment: the interactive community forum. Environmental Impact Assessment Review, 23(3), pp.367-382.

11. Parkinson, J. and Mansbridge, J. eds., 2012. Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale. Cambridge University Press.

12. Bickerstaff, Karen, and Gordon Walker. "Participatory local governance and transport planning." Environment and Planning A 33.3 (2001): 431-451.

13. Kahila-Tani, M., Kytta, M. and Geertman, S., 2019. Does mapping improve public participation? Exploring the pros and cons of using public participation GIS in urban planning practices. Landscape and urban planning, 186, pp.45-55.

14. Meadows, Donella H. "Leverage points: Places to intervene in a system." (1999): 980989.

15. Ives, C.D., Abson, D.J., Von Wehrden, H., Dorninger, C., Klaniecki, K. and Fischer, J., 2018. Reconnecting with nature for sustainability. Sustainability science, 13(5), pp.1389-1397.

16. Meadows, D.H., 2008. Thinking in systems: A primer. chelsea green publishing.

17. Gheerawo, R., 2016. Socially inclusive design: a people-centred perspective.

18. Council, D., 2007. Eleven lessons: Managing design in eleven global companies-desk research report. Design Council.

19. Gall, Tjark, et al. "Re-defining the System Boundaries of Human-Centred Design." Proceedings of the Design Society 1 (2021): 2521-2530.

20. Steen, Marc. "Co-design as a process of joint inquiry and imagination." Design Issues 29.2 (2013): 16-28.

21. Varady, David, Reinout Kleinhans, and Maarten Van Ham. "The potential of community entrepreneurship for neighbourhood revitalization in the United Kingdom and the United States." Entrepreneurial Neighbourhoods (2017).

22. Korsgaard, Steffen, Sabine Müller, and Hanne Wittorff Tanvig. "Rural entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship in the rural–between place and space." International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research (2015).

23. Haugh, Helen. "Community–led social venture creation." Entrepreneurship theory and practice 31.2 (2007): 161-182.

24. Atterton, Jane, and Nicola Thompson. Demographic Ageing and Rural Business: Issues for Research, Policy and Practice. No. 33. Discussion Paper Series, 2015.

25. Rose, A. "The Alison Rose review of female entrepreneurship." London: HM Treasury (2019).