

What makes for a good life in Hay-on-Wye?

Research and Workshop Report



RESEARCH AND WORKSHOP REPORT

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1 | BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The research presented in this report forms part of our work within CUSP – the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (www.cusp.ac.uk). A basic premise of CUSP is that the consumption patterns that characterise current day societies are environmentally unsustainable and require a shift to lower carbon lifestyles. However, any strategy that requires such a change can only be successful if people still feel able to live a ‘decent’ or a good life where they are capable not only of providing food and shelter for themselves and their families but also to participate effectively in the life of society.

As part of this work we have been speaking to people in different places and neighbourhoods to explore how visions of the ‘good life’ and ‘good work’ emerge in the context of their everyday lives. We are looking for how aspirations for living well may vary, but also whether there are any commonalities so that we may understand how people can live well and equitably, but in a way that is also environmentally sustainable. We have therefore conducted our research in three diverse case study sites - Stoke-on-Trent, Woking and Hay-on-Wye. We chose Stoke-on-Trent as a post-industrial city which has areas of social disadvantage, but which also has a rich cultural heritage; Woking which is often portrayed as an affluent commuter town and Hay-on-Wye as a rural market town on the Welsh/English border.



The research questions guiding our work are:

- (a) How might understandings of the good life be informed by aspects of where people live and along existing lines of social difference, including age, gender, ethnicity, and religion.
- (b) How might these understandings diverge within even quite close knit communities, but also are there elements of consensus, common ground and shared dreams for a good life.

This report is the culmination of our research in Hay-on-Wye and presents a summary of the interviews we conducted, and feedback from a workshop we held with a variety of local people and stakeholders.

The report begins with an outline of our research approach before moving on to present some initial findings. We then present a summary of the discussions emanating from the workshop.

2 | OUR APPROACH

Our research in Hay-on-Wye commenced with an in-depth case study of the town, comprising desk-based research and interviews with representatives of a variety of local organisations community groups, charities, and the local council. Our aim was to gain a clearer historically and contextually based understanding of the town, and to help in identifying the key issues which impact on local people.

Our plan for the next phase of the research was to conduct a series of focus groups with a range of residents to elicit views on what it means to live well in the town and what might be improved. We were able to conduct our first focus group with 8 older residents in February 2020, however further planned focus groups had to be cancelled because of severe flooding in the area. Subsequent plans for rescheduling the focus groups were cancelled because of the onset of Covid-19 so we instead conducted a series of individual interviews over the telephone, or via online platforms.

In total we conducted 18 in-depth interviews with 13 females and 5 males, who ranged in age from 16 to mid-80's. Participants were mixed in terms of living alone or in families, working or retired, and were from different parts of the town and surrounding districts.

During these interviews we explored a variety of issues related to: perceptions of place; participation in the community; local culture; ability to be involved and influence local decisions; employment and education opportunities and regeneration, change and stability in the area.

We subsequently analysed the interviews by exploring emerging themes within and across them to identify key issues, both positive and negative, which people identified as being important in relation to living well in Hay-on-Wye currently and in the future. In presenting these research findings and workshops discussions we emphasise that we are sharing participants own narratives and perspectives.

3 | RESEARCH FINDINGS

The preliminary analysis of the interviews we undertook revealed three key themes (a) generational perspectives of living in Hay-on-Wye, (b) understandings of community and the role of community in making Hay-on-Wye a good place to live and (c) narratives of consensus and division. We turn now to discuss these in more detail.

3.1 GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF LIVING IN HAY-ON-WYE

We interviewed people of different ages which allowed us to understand how perspectives of living in Hay-on-Wye varied depending on which life stage people are at, and to reflect on how expectations for what is needed to live well changed as people moved through life course stages.

Many people felt that growing up in Hay was a positive experience, however it was acknowledged widely that young people faced particular challenges. Whilst there are some jobs available in the town and nearby, there are limited career opportunities, meaning young people will most likely need to move away as they get older. Alongside this, the cost of living, most particularly relating to buying a house, but also in terms of transport, was felt to be expensive for young people. Finally, many participants commented on the lack of venues where young people could meet and socialise, especially for teenagers, and that this was a real problem.

“If your kids are not into outdoor activities there’s not really anywhere to go to hang out. There’s no youth club, no community centre, there’s not even a skate park or anything.”

Participants with young families commented on the many aspects of Hay which make it a good place to bring up children – including the green spaces, the slow pace of life, and that the area was safe. Several of the people with families we spoke to had moved to Hay specifically to bring up their children, and this included those who had grown up there, moved away, and returned with their families, commenting that it felt like *"coming home"*:

"I always knew I'd come back. I always thought I would. So I went away to study, ended up staying away for 16 years I think it was. I think it's nice for children. But I guess I was always a country girl really at heart."

Whilst many spoke of the varied leisure and culture opportunities on offer, older people were most likely to say that was their main reason for living there, and often they too had moved to Hay specifically for that purpose. But they also commented that Hay offered a close knit, friendly and caring community, surrounded by green spaces and countryside, all of which are key elements of living a good life.

3.2 COMMUNITY IN HAY-ON-WYE

The idea of 'community' was brought up many times within the interviews we conducted, and it was felt that being a part of the Hay community was an essential aspect of being able to live well there:

"The area has a strong informal community caring ethos, not found elsewhere, people come together to help each other, when you look around there are lots of voluntary organisations supporting each other. It's a rich part of living there."

Several examples of how the community acts for local people were given:

- Members of the community identify gaps in local services, many of which have been cut by local authorities, and intervene by setting up locally run support groups.
- Many people are members of several different community groups, helping to share information and support for local people.

Community is also often enacted in hidden, invisible ways, with individuals and groups offering unofficial support to local people, but as a consequence their contributions often go unnoticed and some people's contributions are missed entirely. This is important in a small town as it is all too easy to assume that some residents are not community-minded.

However, there were also recognised gaps in community provision. It was felt that physical spaces where people could hold meetings, join groups or socialise were missing. It was also felt that some groups were less well served than others, particularly young people who have nowhere to meet.

Whilst acknowledging that the strong sense of community in the town was valuable in helping people to feel connected, it was pointed out that there is a danger that people will become too inward looking and that they also need to consider how to help tackle broader issues in society such as climate change and systemic racism.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on how the community operates in Hay was also discussed by several participants. It was noted that people have pulled together more closely during lockdown periods to ensure their neighbours were looked after and that Hay lends itself to coping with lockdown and self isolation more easily because it is surrounded by countryside. Concerns were expressed about how local businesses and shops can survive economically, but several interviewees did comment that they felt it was even more important now to shop locally.

3.3 NARRATIVES OF CONSENSUS AND DIVISION IN HAY-ON-WYE

In spite of acknowledging the strong community spirit that exists in Hay, and how it helps to make it a good place to live, there were many comments of perceived differences and divisions that exist in the town.

The first noted difference was in the way people were described as being long term locals, going back generations, or as 'newer' residents, also known as 'blow-ins' or 'incomers', even though many of them had lived in the town for several years. Whilst these labels were regularly brought up in the interviews as terms that are widely circulated in the town, there was also a sense that the kind of divisions suggested by them is over-exaggerated. The idea that there are divisions was also felt to be made worse by social media platforms which focus on these differences.

Generally, people commented that everyone gets on very well, leading to a warm, friendly atmosphere in the town.

This distinction between those whose families go back generations and those who had moved into the area from elsewhere was believed to underpin differences in relation to perspectives on what is best for Hay, what should stay the same and what should change. An example of this was given by several participants in relation to the proposal to build a supermarket where the primary school is currently situated. On the one hand ‘incomers’ were identified as those who resisted the idea of a supermarket in the town centre, with concerns about its aesthetics, and that it would put the local, artisan style and independent shops out of business. On the other, it was believed that the longer-term locals would have welcomed an opportunity to shop somewhere less expensive than the local shops, and the single, more expensive, supermarket on the outskirts of town.

“like a lot of people stood up and said ‘well this cannot happen’, and actually there were a lot of people who’ve been born and bred in Hay and have lived here all their lives saying that would be a brilliant thing, a bit of competition, what’s wrong with that?”

Concerns were expressed that these divisions suggest a lack of cohesion in the community, as exemplified by the opposition to the supermarket, and may inhibit new projects like a sports hall or community centre from being instigated.

Several people also talked of the difference between Hay locals, and transient visitors, including tourists, the literary festival attendees, and second-homers. There were mixed feelings about these visitors – it was acknowledged that they bring business, and money to the town, and without that it is hard to imagine how many people could make a living. But there was also a resentment about the disruption the visitors brought to the town.

“Hay Festival, it’s the most love hate bit of Marmite you can have. Because a lot of local people really appreciate that that month can pay for what they’ve lost in December, January and February, you know? You get such a mixture of people who come, mostly they’re okay. They do tend to hog the pavements and not move off them. But apart from that, no, it’s very good for the area and it’s only for a short time.”

Participants also talked about the geographical divisions in the town – between the English/Welsh borders, and the resulting different postcodes which shape how people define themselves, the services they are eligible to access, and are even a part of knowing which pub you are likely to feel most at home in. Difference and divisions were therefore a part of the everyday narratives of the participants’ interviews.

It is however important to highlight that in spite of these apparent differences, the majority of participants felt this did not truly represent the way Hay feels on an everyday basis, rather they enjoyed the fact that wherever they went in town they would run into someone they knew. Even walking down the street would lead to several informal conversations and catch-ups:

“When you’re in Hay and you’re kind of wandering around, you bump into somebody you haven’t seen in a couple of weeks and you think, ah, we need to go and get a coffee. And I think that is incredibly fortunate.”

Several interviewees observed that differences are important for a community and are to be celebrated, when different people move in and out of the area all the time it makes it a more interesting place to live: *“It feels like a bowl, a little bowl of soup. And you have new ingredients coming in which is lovely.”*

It was noted, however, that there is a danger that the more disadvantaged, and less empowered are forgotten when decisions are being made about what takes place in Hay, and it was suggested that one of the key things to prevent that happening is to work hard at being inclusive, and to ignore potential differences:

“It’s how you heal those rifts, so you need to remind people that yes we might have different views but we also have things in common and I think this is an example of how you can still get on perfectly well and just don’t talk about politics. There’s just no point.”

4 | REPORT FROM WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

An important aspect of our work is including the perspectives and views of local people and in each of our case study sites we held workshops to share our findings and encourage open discussions on topics of locally specific interest. As Covid-19 restrictions were still in place when we hosted the Hay-on-Wye workshop on 12th November 2020, we held it over an online platform. The aims of the workshop were:

- (a) to present the initial findings of our research and draw on the local expertise and knowledge of a range of different stakeholders and residents of the town to obtain their perspectives on that work, and
- (b) to consider how to make our own work most useful locally by initiating discussions and creating opportunities for networking.

We invited all the people we had already spoken to and encouraged others who were interested in our work to attend. A total of 13 participants registered who were mostly a combination of residents and representatives from local community charities.

We commenced the workshop with a presentation of our early findings (see Appendix) to provide context for the afternoon, after which participants were invited to join breakout discussion sessions and give subsequent feedback on those discussions to the whole group. Each group was assigned a facilitator from members of CUSP whose role was to encourage discussions, to ensure that each participant was able to contribute should they wish to, to take notes of the discussions and in some cases to provide group feedback to the whole workshop.

4.1 DISCUSSION PERIOD 1: RESPONDING TO OUR RESEARCH

In this first discussion period we asked people to reflect on the research data we had presented, and to consider how it related to their own experiences of living and working in Hay-on-Wye. The following are a collection of points made by the different groups in the workshop in response to this.

4.1.1 Considering divisions

In relation to the statements about divisions between ‘incomers’ and ‘blow ins’ it was felt that this was not something that most people experienced on a daily basis when meeting people. It was also suggested that reducing the divisions to local residents and ‘incomers’ ignores the most important aspect that there are also underlying economic and social differences between the different groups. Property values are too high, as are commercial prices, and this causes tensions between locals and ‘incomers’ who tend to have more disposable income. It was agreed, however, that social media has a role to play in amplifying these divisions and this has been exacerbated during the pandemic. It was also highlighted that social diversity can also be seen as a positive aspect of living in Hay as interesting people are attracted to move and live there.

Some of the differences between people are emphasised by Hay’s position on the Welsh/English border so that there are different kinds of services on offer from separate local authorities and knowing about these services and how to access them is therefore more challenging. The small size of Hay also means it is difficult for local people to have an effective say in larger government discussions and policies and, combined with the fact that Hay sits in the Brecon Beacons National Park with that authority’s own interests, makes local governance even more challenging.

4.1.2 Supporting residents

The onset of the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the privatisation and reduction in community services for all ages. One group commented that it is not just young people who struggle with being able to afford to live in Hay, older people too find it an expensive place to live, especially if they want to downsize because there are few smaller affordable houses. Housing is expensive compared to the average wage because of the number of properties that are holiday homes and often land that does become available for building homes on tends to be sold for private development, rather than affordable housing for local people.

There was agreement in general that there is a lack of community spaces and those spaces that exist are privately owned rather than belonging to the community. Young people in particular urgently need to have somewhere for them to socialise. Hay is regarded as a place for families to live well, but not necessarily for the oldest old, and for children and youth.

4.2 DISCUSSION PERIOD 1: TOWARDS A GOOD LIFE IN HAY.ON-WYE

During the second discussion period participants were asked to consider what is necessary to ensure fair, lasting and sustainable prosperity and how this can help towards achieving a good life in Hay-on-Wye. The following is a summary of these discussions and include suggestions for how to tackle existing problems, and how to enable Hay-on-Wye to develop in the future.

4.2.1 Supporting communities to work together

Participants remarked on the silo approaches that were often undertaken in relation to problems in Hay with different social enterprises working separately from each other. It was felt there is a need for a more coordinated approach to issues in the town which could be done either by having a project overseen by a single social enterprise or more communication between social enterprises. Volunteers and the public sector also need to work together to solve problems more efficiently.

Further to this, it was suggested that grassroots organisations would be best placed to identify what support services people need to live well and to come together to make change happen. It was believed that to an extent people had lost their sense of having to look after themselves and that identifying charismatic local leaders and persistent volunteers is a key priority to help make the necessary changes in the town.

Once initiatives are seen to be successful, people in the community are more likely to understand their capacity to make changes.

Those elements which a community need to function should be available and secured for the future, such as a post office, a local bank and a community hub. These are seen as vital components of living well in Hay. Discussions took place about where the post office could be placed now the central one is closing, including the possibility of locating it in the Co-op.

It was emphasised though that careful consideration needs to be given to how to make any changes happen in the town, as it is not best practice in the long run to rely on one or two people to drive changes forward.

One way of bringing individuals together is to hold free local events, which are always well attended, and serve to make people feel good about where they live, but it was acknowledged that these take a lot of organisation and effort and usually depend on the efforts of a few people.

Suggestions on how to improve access to community spaces included negotiating shared use of existing privately owned spaces, and the possibility of some form of community space being made available in the newly regenerated Castle.

4.2.2 Responding to the pandemic

The experience of Covid-19 has really emphasised the need for the area to have decent broadband as more people work from home and are increasingly likely to do so in the future. In addition, it will be difficult to encourage new businesses and employers to move into the area if there is insufficient online connectivity. One suggestion was made of a community shared ownership approach to broadband in Hay, and the setting up of an internet café in the town.

It was also considered a possibility that the pandemic will lead to second home owners selling their properties, some businesses will close and unemployment will rise. But there is also a chance that people will want to move out of the cities and buy homes in more rural locations like Hay. The town needs to prepare for these possibilities.

Concerns were also expressed for how the local economy will be affected by the move to a cashless society during the pandemic as it is known that there is a long tradition in Hay of people relying on their income coming from more than one source of employment, often paid in cash. Alternative methods of paying for goods and services in the town were discussed along the lines of the Hay voucher, or a time banking system such as being considered for the running of the local transport scheme as part of the Bronllys Wellbeing Park development.

4.2.3 Sustainable, equitable Hay

It was pointed out that the way communities lived in the past would most likely be considered very sustainable, particularly in the way farms were run and houses were built, but that this also involved hard physical work that people would not welcome today.

One way of making Hay more sustainable would be to make changes to the public transport system as Hay is far from any major transport hubs and suffers from accessibility problems because of its more isolated location. Public transport is very expensive and local links are poor, however it is also very difficult to conceive of how this can be improved to an extent where people would not need to rely on the car for their daily needs.

It was acknowledged that the young, and the oldest old are less empowered generally and therefore it is harder for them to be able to voice their needs. Others need to ensure their perspectives are sought and included in discussions about the key issues that affect them. One suggestion for how to manage the lack of affordable housing for young and older people was to create a combination of alms houses and starter flats together, possibly in the cattle market area, but also for consideration in other potential development sites. The possibility of considering the creation of a Community Land Trust was also suggested to help achieve this kind of development, such as has been successfully done at Bronllys Wellbeing Park.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our intention in running this research dissemination and local consultation workshop was threefold:

- to share some initial findings from the work we have been undertaking in Hay-on-Wye and receive feedback on it
- to work with local residents and representatives from various local charities, businesses and the city council to develop ideas of what makes for a good life in Hay-on-Wye, and
- to consider how to translate visions of a good life in Hay-on-Wye into practice

We hope that these early discussions have initiated or affirmed long lasting collaborations and networks across the town and between different groups and individuals to continue the work of understanding what makes for a good life in Hay-on-Wye.

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Attending from CUSP:

Kate Burningham
Linda Gessner
Catherine Hunt
Anastasia Loukianov
Susan Venn

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APPENDIX

Presentation: “What makes for a good life in Woking?
Introducing our research and learning from you”, Dr Susan Venn and Dr
Kate Burningham, Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable
Prosperity, University of Surrey.



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Overview

- Situated understandings of the good life
- Current research in Hay-on-Wye
- Emerging findings from interviews
- Over to you...

Our project : 'situated understandings of the good life'



- An environmentally sustainable society has to enable people to live a decent or good life.
- What does this mean to ordinary people?
- How are understandings informed by aspects of locality and along existing lines of social difference?
- Focus on diversity and consensus within and between different places
- In depth case studies: Stoke-on-Trent; Hay-on-Wye and Woking

What we did

- Desk based scoping study
- Key informant interviews: learning from local knowledge; building networks
- Interviews with individuals, face to face, telephone and online
- Understanding what it means to live well in Hay-on-Wye and nearby
- What would make for a good life in Hay-on-Wye



Who is Hay-on-Wye for?



Place, space and people: A community of and for Hay-on-Wye



Stepping in where help is needed:

- Identifying gaps in services and intervening by setting up support groups
- Communities are overlapping and multiple
- Community is often enacted in hidden, invisible ways
- But as a consequence, often goes unnoticed or unspoken

Extending communities:

- Physical places are as important as community spaces
- Equal access to community spaces is lacking
- Tensions and divisions

Narratives of consensus and division



Multiple divisions permeate narratives

- Locals and blow-ins, incomers; tourists and residents
- Second homers, Airbnb, festival goers
- Welsh and English, Hereford and Powys postcodes
- Exacerbated by social media

What is best for Hay-on-Wye and who decides?

- Different perspectives on what is best for Hay-on-Wye can and have shaped changes
- Who has a 'right' to say and contribute

Breakout Session 1: Responding to our research



Reflecting on what we have presented, and the interview narratives you received consider:

How do our initial observations relate to your local knowledge and experience from living/working in Hay-on-Wye?



Breakout Session 2 Towards a sustainable good life in Hay-on-Wye



- Considering what has been said so far, and the existing assets of Hay-on-Wye, what needs to be put in place to help people secure a good life for Hay-on-Wye