

THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL TOWNS

A Position Paper by the European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST)

The Purpose of this Paper is to raise the profile of small towns across Europe – as opposed to large urban towns – and to try to influence future thinking and policy development in the Council of Europe and the European Union, particularly the Director General for the Regions and Urban Policy and the Director General for Agriculture and Rural Development



ECOVAST is an International Non-Government Organisation

ECOVAST is a member of the Council of Europe (International Non Government Groups)

ECOVAST is a member of the RURBAN network of DG Region

ECOVAST is a member of the DG Agri Rural Policy Group

September 2013

This Position Paper is also being sent to the following organisations:

The PREPARE Network which represents a large number of rural networks in countries across Europe, including: Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden as well as the pan-European network of Forum Synergies and ECOVAST

The European Rural University (APURE) which stages a 'University Event' every 2 years to discuss rural issues, involving academics and practitioners. Over recent years it has staged these events in Italy, France, England, Hungary, and Poland.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which has undertaken work on Rural Urban Partnerships and held 3 major conferences in Metz, France in 2012 and Warsaw, Poland and Bologna, Italy in 2013. ECOVAST/PREPARE have attended each of these events.

The European Federation of Towns and Municipalities which has membership from the Member States of France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and Spain.

The Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Croatia

Action for Market Towns: the United Kingdom

Small Towns for Tomorrow: also the United Kingdom

The ten ECOVAST National Sections in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and the United Kingdom will use this Position Paper to spread the message about the importance of small towns in their countries and influence their Members of the European Parliament and local authorities who are responsible for policies affecting the development in small towns.

ECOVAST: Information on the organisation www.ecovast.org

ASSET: Information on the project can be found via the Home Page of the ECOVAST website http://ecovast.org/english/asset_e.htm

and at <http://dorfwiki.org/wikicgi?SmallTowns/TheASSETProject/Draft>

The pictures and information on the towns highlighted in Chapter 7 are the results of the work of ECOVAST with small towns or from the Internet – Wikipedia town sites

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(i) Small towns are a vital asset to Europe. Their role has evolved and changed over the years and their vitality has fluctuated in response to historical forces of all kinds. Changes will continue and there is a crucial need to understand the challenges they face in a modern world. Small towns cannot be 'frozen' or preserved in aspic.

(ii) Small towns are 'urban' in character with high densities of buildings with narrow streets, usually focussing on some form of central place. They reflect the history of architecture of the region and are more complete examples of their history than larger towns which have succumbed to pressures of development, with large high rise new buildings of a different scale, and large new shop fronts, wider roads and multi-storey car parks.

(iii) Small towns are essential to the well-being of millions of the population and to their surrounding rural areas of villages, hamlets and countryside and their joint future of surviving and thriving is bound together. They are vital centres in the areas remote from major urban influences.

(iv) However small towns suffer from economies of scale and the continual threats of more centralisation of services elsewhere.

(v) This paper promotes the importance of small towns across the countries of Europe (EU and non EU States) and the contribution they can make to the economy; and the opportunities through their distinctiveness for rural tourism, improvements to local services, local food supply, local energy supply, culture and places for providing learning and skills. It sets out the position held by ECOVAST linked directly to survey evidence which has been gathered specifically about small towns

(vi) ECOVAST research has found 4,581 small towns across Europe where the populations are over 10,000 but under 30,000. More than 78 million people live in them – more people than in any single country in Europe except Germany. (The research evidence covers all geographical Europe excluding Russia, not just the European Union area).

(vii) There will be many thousands more with smaller populations than 10,000, though detailed evidence across the whole of Europe is not available. The ECOVAST European survey identified some 243 million people in areas where the population was in settlements of less than 10,000 people.

(viii) All of these small towns will have a hinterland of villages and countryside and therefore have an influence over most rural areas.

(ix) Small towns will therefore have an impact on many millions of people across Europe.

(x) Small towns are an essential part of the hierarchy of European settlements and form a link between urban and rural areas and should be an essential part of any urban/rural partnership.

(xi) Opportunities will exist to support small towns in the European Union Member States through the new 7 year programme period 2013-2020 to support small towns.

(xii) Small towns already meet several of the key 'Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent' set out by the Council of Europe although small towns are not referred to specifically.

(xiii) Neither the current urban nor the rural policies in Europe are appropriate for small towns. ECOVAST wishes to promote a specific set of policies in both the European Union and the Council of Europe which reflect their uniqueness and special needs; to maintain their character; and enable them to continue to serve as rural service centres.

(xiv) ECOVAST asserts the vital importance of small towns for the future well-being of Europe and calls upon policy makers to reflect the needs and high potential of small towns, so that they may truly serve as assets to Europe, particularly at this time.

1. Introduction

1.1 The European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST) has been working for nearly 30 years to promote the well-being of the people and heritage of the rural regions of Europe. Millions of people across Europe live in small towns which have been a vital asset to Europe. Their role has evolved and changed over the years and their vitality has fluctuated in response to historical forces of all kinds. Changes will continue and there is a crucial need to understand the challenges they face in a modern world. Small towns cannot be 'frozen' or preserved in aspic. They are essential to the well-being of their surrounding villages and countryside. This paper sets out the opinions of ECOVAST based both on its experience and involvement with small towns over many years and also the evidence that it has gathered specifically about them.

2. Purpose of this Position Paper

2.1 This paper will set out the characteristics of small towns and their roles; it will look at their challenges and opportunities, highlighting a few examples of good practice

2.2 The purpose of this ECOVAST Position Paper is to influence policy makers across geographical Europe, the Council of Europe, as well as policy and programme designers of the European Union and to set out why 'small rural towns' are an important part of the settlement hierarchy in Europe and form a link between urban and rural areas. To this end ECOVAST is already working with DG Agri as a member of their Policy Committee and with DG Regio's RURBAN group.

2.3 This paper also argues why these small rural towns need to have a set of specific policies relating to their needs rather than just urban or rural policies. (The special needs for particular types of rural areas – peri-urban areas on the fringes of major urban conurbations are already accepted).

2.4 This paper is timely coming at the start of a new era of EU policies; for the first time there is a deliberate attempt to integrate and harmonise urban and rural policies and the promotion of community led development.

2.5 The information on small towns is not just relevant at the European level but to individual countries, regional and local authorities, business organisations and voluntary bodies.

2.6 ECOVAST is aware that there is a lot of interest in towns across Europe and that various initiatives are being pursued – for example the development of 'Transition Towns' which promote sustainable living and build local ecological resilience – by reducing the dependence on fossil fuels and reducing food miles. Güssing in Austria and Totnes in England are developing these ideas and interest is spreading – Transition Towns were discussed by young academics in a gathering in April 2013 in Marburg, Germany.

3. The ECOVAST ASSET project

3.1 In 2005 a major international conference was sponsored by the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and ECOVAST reflecting the commitment to the well-being of small towns. The two conclusions argued firstly that current policies for rural or urban areas did not fit the needs for small towns which act as rural centres for a surrounding hinterland of villages and countryside; and secondly it decided to set up a specific ECOVAST project to focus on small towns, called Action to Strengthen Small European Towns or ASSET.

The project had four specific aims:

- to promote co-operation, and the exchange of good practice between Governmental and other agencies throughout Europe who offer support to small towns
- to promote contact and the exchange of good practice between individual small towns throughout Europe
- to speak on behalf of small towns to influence the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the Committee of the Regions and Governments
- to facilitate, support and encourage the delivery of research to enable evidence-based policy approaches to strengthen the well-being of small towns.

3.2 The ASSET project builds on two Symposia held in Austria to discuss small historic towns of Central Europe – in Murau in 1998 and Waidhofen-an-der-Ybbs in 2002. These symposia recognised that small towns faced many threats posed by globalisation; losses due to modern development of out of town shopping centres; and centralisation of services into larger towns. However on the positive side they recognised that they had significant historic assets with compactness, distinctiveness and a physical fabric which is human in scale. They also agreed that they should develop local economies which would promote local well-being – those which could develop local resources of woodlands and farm produce which in turn could strengthen and diversify sub-regional economies. There was also a recognition that new telecommunications opportunities could be of benefit to rural people and businesses in small towns.

3.3 Since the setting up of the ASSET project ECOVAST and its member organisations have arranged or been part of many discussions held in north, west, central, east and south Europe recognising the striking differences in different parts of the continent and the need to engage with all areas. Special workshops to develop the ideas set out in this paper have been held in Makarska, Croatia; St Veit an der Glan in Austria and Potsdam in the Federal State of Brandenburg, Germany. Other events have been held in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom where the needs of small towns and exchanges of best practice and research findings have been discussed (full list is in section 10).

3.4 The ASSET project has led to several specific pieces of research and evidence gathering. The pan-European work has not been restricted to the European Union and the potential accession states but to cover all **geographical Europe** (but excluding European Russia and European Turkey). This research has not only been discussed in many countries listed above but also with the Council of Europe and the Committee of the Regions. All these events and meetings have contributed to the development of this paper.

3.5 Other research has been carried out: Austrian ECOVAST has produced a Register of Small Towns in Austria; Germany has undertaken research on small towns in Germany as well as working with small towns in Brandenburg where an association predominantly for small towns with historic centres exists and works successfully; to get them recognised as important settlements; Croatia has held several small town events to discuss the issues facing them; Romania has been looking at specific heritage assets and Russia has undertaken a lot of work on specialist 'monastery towns'.

4. What is a 'town'

4.1 There is no formal definition for a 'town'. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to a 'town' being distinct from the 'country' and the word 'urban' as a place where people live in towns and cities and 'rural' being the countryside which embraces rural settlements.

4.2 The Opinion Surveys gave a variety of answers to this question demonstrating that there is no simple or specific European definition on what makes a 'small town'.

4.3 It is recognised that the debate is complex. The definition of a 'town' can vary from one country to another. Towns can be defined by law in some countries, for example in Austria and Germany. Towns can be classified as 'historic' if they meet certain criteria such as having a Town Charter dating from the Middle Ages.

4.4 Some communities wish to call themselves a 'town' whilst others have real concerns that the simple designation of 'town' would mean that they will have to take unwanted amounts of growth and development. However it is the spatial planning policies of individual countries that will define which particular settlements should grow and which should not. The definition of a settlement as a 'town' is not the deciding factor.

4.5 These towns have mostly grown slowly over time – some dating back to Roman and/or Greek times. They reflect the various periods of their history through their street plans and buildings: with examples from medieval, renaissance, baroque, 18th century, industrial revolution right up to modern times. Many will have gone on to become a major city or metropolis but many thousands of others have remained small in size.

4.6 Most towns across Europe will have grown up because of their geographical location such as:

- a coastal or river port linking places and countries;
- a river crossing;
- a cross road of routes;
- at staging posts along a major cross country route;
- on defensive sites around a castle or fort;
- around a religious centre for worship, teaching and pilgrimage (abbey or monastery);
- at places where it was convenient to do business
- a market to sell goods produced in the surrounding areas;
- places large enough for different skills to develop – for example through the development of medieval guilds.

4.7 However some towns will have developed because of specialities: such as fishing ports; around mines or quarries where salt or other minerals were found; or through the discovery of spas for health or the popularity of the seaside

4.8 Some towns (large or small) have been founded specifically as new settlements because of war or population explosion in the Middle Ages (such as the Bastide towns of South West France or the Germanic expansions into middle Europe across present day Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia and Transylvania or even modern 'new towns' founded to cope with the huge growth due to the industrial revolution (such as the mining towns in South Wales) or the spread of suburban settlements around major metropolises such as London.

4.9 It is therefore true that there are great similarities in many small towns which have followed a similar history over the ages but there are huge differences in the political context which different countries have faced since the 20th century after collapses of empires and the impact of World Wars; the emergence of new states and this political background will have created very different circumstances for small towns and how they may develop.

4.10 Function and Size

The debates on what is a 'small town' have focussed on two aspects – function and size. Small rural towns are places which provide for both themselves and their hinterlands. They provide local markets, shops – often having representatives of the major food chains, and some branches of 'magnet traders', as well as acting as a centre for business activity with a wide range of services which can include administration, leisure and secondary education. Not all small towns will have all these but will provide enough to make them rural service centres for their surrounding hinterland.

4.11 The surveys carried out to support these debates have involved pan European studies for both facts and opinions and an in-depth look at the assets of 165 individual small towns in South East England. It is accepted that this region is one of the more densely populated regions of Europe but it has significant rural areas with a variety of nationally designated landscapes and some 1,400 village settlements as well as 165 small towns. These towns are nearly all historic and have grown up since medieval times and remain compact reflecting architecture and history throughout the ages and not overwhelmed by modern development (because of strict English planning policies). Many have Town Charters issued in medieval times. They are typical of all small towns in England and also similar to small towns across Europe sharing a common heritage and serving the needs of themselves and their hinterlands across the ages, whatever political regimes have impacted on their countries.

4.12 ECOVAST through its debates and the South East England studies has identified several major characteristics for 'towns' – based on the functions they provide:

- towns are settlements which have hinterlands serving the needs of the town's own inhabitants and of surrounding smaller settlements. Villages and the countryside are often the hinterland of small rural towns, and small towns in turn are the hinterland of larger towns; and in turn larger towns are within the hinterland of major conurbations. The pattern of dependency between places is complicated. There are 'city regions' across Europe, dominated by one huge metropolis; yet other regions remain multi centred.
- towns were a market place for the goods from surrounding areas.
- towns are normally freestanding although some have ribbon development joining them to other settlements but these may still have their own hinterland. Many originally small towns have been completely swallowed up by large towns.

- towns are more compact with a more densely developed populated area than a village – an ‘urban’ characteristic
- they generally have a pattern of narrow streets dating from historic times.
- towns have a clear central place – a main place for meeting and for trade often called the ‘market place’.
- towns will have religious buildings attracting people from a wide area – cathedral, abbey, convent, mosque or synagogue.
- towns will have cultural assets such as museums or theatres also serving a wider area than the town itself
- historic towns will have many remnants of their history – walls, forts, castles, or palaces, and central places and streets with buildings in continuous facades.
- Small towns provide employment and service not just for themselves but also for their hinterlands. They provide retail centres – having representatives of the major food chains, some branches of ‘magnet traders’, markets; they act as a centre for business activity with a wide range of other services which can include administration, leisure and secondary education.
- Not all small towns will have all these or to the same degree but all will provide at least some of these functions.

4.13 There are many small settlements which historically were ‘towns’ which no longer function as places which provide markets, shops, services such as education for a hinterland of villages and the countryside. However many of these historic places display a wealth of ‘heritage’ assets which attract tourists and they have restaurants and hotels as well as important buildings to visit. These assets are usually owned and operated by local residents rather than as part of a major chain so any income stays ‘local’. They also provide local jobs and make important contributions to the local, regional and even national economy and should be recognised for this.

4.14 Size - Can ‘small town’ be defined ?

ECOVAST feels strongly that there are some towns which could be defined as ‘small towns’ which are found throughout Europe and which are essential to the well-being of rural areas. ECOVAST uses both size and function to define them as well as their particular assets of distinctiveness and contribution to rural landscapes.

4.15 The ASSET European Study looked at all town settlements across geographical Europe (except for European Russia or European Turkey) and prepared a list of them in various size bands. It used one primary source and a few secondary sources for population sizes from the largest cities down to towns with populations above 10,000 people. The data used was for town populations not for towns and their hinterlands.

4.16 It was impossible to get comparable data for all the countries of Europe for towns below 10,000. This does not mean we are suggesting that a 10,000 population is the lower limit for a small town. However, it cannot be clear without major new survey work how to identify the exact number of places with populations below 10,000 which today provide the functions of a ‘town’.

4.17 This is far from the case. ECOVAST fully recognises that there are many very small towns below 10,000 functioning as rural service centres – for instance in Germany and France. In the more remote, less densely populated countries the size of towns is generally much smaller – in Finland small towns often have populations below 2,000 people. Even in the study of towns in the more crowded region of South East England, 119 of the 165 small towns identified and studied had populations of less than 10,000, with 58 of these with populations below 5,000 populations.

4.18 The ECOVAST Opinion Surveys suggested that the upper limit on size of a ‘small town’ is not uniform across European opinion. The responses from 22 countries gave 12 different answers varying from 2,000 in Malta and Luxembourg to 50,000 in Austria, Spain and Sweden.. Within countries it also varies – for example South East England used an upper limit of 20,000 for its Small Town programme whereas other regions in England used 25,000 or 30,000 as the upper limit.

4.19 However ECOVAST also felt that all settlements with a population of 10,000 or above would have the functions of a ‘town’ and this was also borne out in the Study of South East Towns where all towns with populations above 10,000 provided all the functions of towns.

5. How many small towns in Europe and how many people live in them

5.1 The results of the ASSET European study demonstrated just how many small towns there were across Europe with 5,790 towns with populations of less than 50,000 with 4,580 small towns in the 10,000-30,000 size-band making up 64.2% of all towns identified with a combined population of 77,996,669. This represents a very large number of people living in these small towns – 78 million bigger than all the individual European countries except Germany. Together they could present a large voice to represent their particular needs.

5.2 It is recognised that the towns between 30,000 and 50,000 are still 'small' compared to the larger towns and cities of Europe and the study identified 1,210 of them with a combined population of 45,366,044.:

5.3 However, it was felt that it is the smaller towns (those under 30,000) have managed to resist the severe impact of major modernisation of their retail centres which make many larger towns look like 'clones' – certainly at ground level and so they are the ones which are more likely to retain a more complete and cohesive record of their history.

5.4 It is also the smaller towns that have found it difficult to maintain their roles in the modern world dominated by economies of scale and which are most likely will continue to have the most difficulty in adapting to new circumstances.

6. The Challenges Small Towns Face

6.1 Small towns have suffered over recent years from a variety problems. The First Opinion Survey provided information about the current state of small towns and how they feel about their future.

6.2 The Opinion Survey indicated that the picture is very complex, although there seems to be a lot of activity going on albeit in a piecemeal way. The respondents highlighted several major problems including outmigration; loss of employment and unemployment generally; loss of facilities; new development; out of town shopping centres and the growth of traffic and consequent demand for car parking. They also cited loss of traditional buildings, weak infrastructure; poor public transport, pressures on land and planning and housing policies.

6.3 They did accept that there were some things in place to help them with information exchange, development of networks, lobbying and even some financial help from either governments, regions or other bodies.

6.4 Many thought that larger towns received more help than smaller towns.

6.5 Most countries reported that there were many interactions between small towns and the hinterlands they serve – particularly on shopping and markets; locally produced food; leisure; health, tourism and transport.

6.6 But the overwhelming message from all quarters of Europe was about the problems they have faced over the past few years.

6.7 Globalisation

The fact that food is a world commodity rather than generally produced and sold locally and this has led to food processing being carried out in larger and larger units away from the site of production and often in major cities rather than in villages and small towns.

6.8 Centralisation

Evidence from surveys of South East Towns in England has shown that many small towns have lost their original administrative roles with 38 former administrative centre declining to only 10 today. Many have also lost services, particularly hospitals which have become much more specialised and reflect economies of scale for complicated and serious medical conditions.

6.9 Out Migration

A serious problem felt by many countries was that of out migration from their small towns, especially of young people. Many people leave to live in large urban areas or to pursue higher education, but few of them return, and this is threatening the demographic balance of many towns.

6.10 Pressures of New Development

Many had concerns about the pressures for new development in small towns - for industry; new housing – and also a loss of agricultural land.

6.11 A major part of this concern was about out of town shopping centres and their devastating impact on existing small town centres.

6.12 Impact on landscapes

This led to concerns about the pressures on the landscapes around small towns.

6.13 The Economic Recession

The responses from the Second Survey gave a valuable insight into the impact which the economic downturn is having across Europe. All countries reported that they had been affected adversely by the recession - no country has escaped but some had been affected more than others.

6.14 Loss of jobs

Most respondents commented on loss of jobs – both by the closure of businesses, or reductions in their workforces – and the impact caused by the problems in neighbouring countries. They also recognised that the decline in employment has implications not only on the town itself but also on the villages in their hinterlands.

6.15 Loss of retail

Almost all of them had lost facilities in the small town, with a particular emphasis in the retail sector. For some, this is due to small businesses being unable to compete with larger stores in urban centres, but also “out of town” shopping which has been an issue long before the current recession. Evidence shows that this “out of town” development has not ceased during the recession but slowed down a little. New developments in the towns themselves have suffered with many half completed sites as well as empty premises. The recession has led to the closure of several major and well-known retail chains. There was a major loss to 38 small towns in South East England after one of the magnet trader chains (Woolworths) closed down.

6.16 Impact on Tourism and Heritage

The impact on heritage is particularly worrying as it is heritage tourism that often offers a potential for the future with possible sustainable visitor spend.

6.17 Countries reliant on tourism have major concerns about the tourism decline and consequent loss of employment and facilities. Fewer tourists visiting result in less spend in their towns, with historic buildings running the risk of becoming disused, leading to lack of maintenance and decay, fewer being sold or let, in a stagnant property market or even lost altogether.

6.18 Impact on Housing

Many countries report on difficulties in their housing markets – most citing a shortage of finance available, and house repossessions. Previous housing booms have left many properties partly completed, or finished, but empty.

6.19 Declining public purses

Local Authorities everywhere have been facing a declining public purse yet often increasing demands for these scarce resources. The economic recession has added to these pressures and the future outlook continues to be bleak.

6.20 The impact of diminishing public services will impact on libraries, social care, health and support to public transport as well as repairs to roads and car parking.

6.21 Long Term Sustainability of Projects

Funding through grants or public bodies is time limited particularly for on-going management of a project. This is unlikely to improve in the future and all projects need to look for long term support from the private sector if the project is expected to go on after the initial setting up phases.

7. Opportunities

7.1 However there are also opportunities for small towns to use their considerable assets to improve their economic situation and many have already taken up this challenge and can demonstrate the benefits. The very large number and variety of small towns across Europe can offer a variety of 'good practice'.

7.2 Not all will be directly replicable in all countries but many can give ideas which could be followed up and adapted to the circumstances that exist in different countries.

7.3 Direct Contribution to Economies –

The survey of the economic functions provided in 165 small rural towns in SE England found more than 12,000 businesses in them - providing local jobs for both the town and its hinterland, pumping money into the local economy and also contributing to the economy of the wider region and nationally. Many of the towns have gone on to develop projects which will increase the opportunities for additional trade.

7.3.1 Many small towns have **converted redundant buildings** into a venue for small businesses on 'easy in easy out' terms. Some will also provide centralised services which can be used by the all the businesses in them.

7.3.2 **Local Loyalty schemes** which have been taken up by many towns in the United Kingdom are designed to improve local retail trade by motivating customers to be more loyal to local shops. They usually gain rewards in the form of points or vouchers to be exchanged later for goods. The scheme encourages them to use the local shop more often and it also improves the trade of the member shops. The member shops are individual shops rather than part of a national or regional chain. **Haslemere in Surrey, England** (population 15,600)-launched its scheme in 2005 and won the Action for Market Town's national award in 2006.



Haslemere receiving National AMT Award

Reward cardholders spent on average 30% more each visit and half of the residents have now bought a Haslemere Rewards Card. In 2009, it was reckoned that £64,000 of purchases were made by reward cardholders.

7.4 Making the Best Use of New Technologies

7.4.1 The **Internet** has enabled many people to work at home – either full time or part time, and many businesses can be based in villages and small towns. . People based at home use local facilities giving the town increased trade.

7.4.2 **Telecottages** have been popular for many years since the 1980s. They brought access to new technology to isolated communities and remote rural areas. They can be run as commercial enterprises or as charities as part of the community-based voluntary sector. They operated out of schools, libraries, village halls as well as self-contained buildings. The original experiment began in the remote Swedish town of Vemdalen and this model was adopted in the United Kingdom.

7.4.3 Nowadays most people and most businesses have their own computers but a lot depends upon the **availability and speed of broadband**. Not all rural areas or small towns have yet been provided with an adequate speed of broadband.

7.4.4 **Internet cafes** set up by private sector entrepreneurs have sprung up all over Europe in both large and small towns. Many **public buildings** such as local authority centres, particularly libraries provide computers and access to the internet. Many small towns have libraries.

7.4.5 British Telecom, one of the main broadband providers in the UK is providing a series of **'hot spots'** in different locations, in both small and large towns, that BT customers can use when they are on the move. Companies such as Starbucks are now places which people can use for work or social purposes as well as having coffee and food.

7.5 Market for Local Products:

7.5.1 Small towns offer a good opportunity to develop food processing and to sell the produce that is grown locally. This can provide local jobs and cuts down 'food miles' travelled by produce. Selling locally enables customers to meet the growers of their produce and links farmers directly into their local communities.

7.5.2 **Farmers markets** are now well established across England and have proved very popular. Many are held in larger towns but there are many very successful markets in small towns, many held weekly. There are guidelines set out by the National Association of Farmers Markets which suggest that food should come from within 30 miles of the market. It is about 'quality' food and also encourages the local population to understand the seasonality of foods and many people are surprised on the range of items for sale. There is a national association which helps and guides them. Some towns have become famous as **'food towns'**, which pride themselves on their sale of local produce and local gourmet restaurants such as Ludlow, Shropshire, also in England.

7.5.3. The local specialist produce in an area has given rise to numerous small town food events and festivals.

7.5.4 The small town of **Edam**, in North Holland, in the Netherlands (population 7,400) is famous for its cheese of the same name and a re-enactment of the old cheese market is staged every Wednesday in July and August.

7.5.5 Lower Austria is famous for its pumpkins which are made into oil, and exported world-wide. The pumpkin harvest is celebrated by many small towns all over Lower Austria. The very small town of **Raabs an der Thaya** (population 3,100) together with many small towns in the Retzerland area hold their own Pumpkin Festivals every autumn.

7.5.6 However, it is not just about farm products from the land, but about produce from the sea and freshwater lakes and rivers. Fish festivals can be found all over Europe in both large and small towns and villages. Small coastal towns in Spain, such as **Nerja in Andalusia** (population 21,000) celebrate the Virgin del Carmen Fish Festival, a religious event which blesses fishermen and their catch.

7.5.7 The world famous wine areas of France, Italy and Germany have seen many small town wine festivals develop. Many very small towns across the famous wine zones of France have festivals: for instance the town of Chablis (population 2,500) in the Burgundy area celebrates the **Chablis Wine Festival** every Spring, and the town of **St Emilion** (population only 2,000) celebrates a wine festival of its famous Bordeaux wine. Similarly in Italy the small town of **Greve in Tuscany** (population



Cheese Market in Edam, The Netherlands



Nerja Fish Festival Andalusia Spain

14,300) holds a wine festival in the main town square celebrating the 'noble' Chianti wine; and also in Tuscany the spectacular hill-top town of **Montepulciano** (population 14,400) celebrates the wine of the same name and includes activities such as barrel rolling. In Germany small towns and villages along the River Mosel celebrate the harvest of Mosel wine. The small attractive tourist town of **Bernkastel** (population 6,500) stages a Wine Festival of the Middle Mosel every September.

The Hungarian desert wine of Tokaj is celebrated every year in the small town of **Tokaj** (population 5,000). Many other towns with more locally important wines also have festivals, usually at harvest time.

7.6 Revitalising the role of a small town

7.6.1 The historic small town of **Wittstock** (population 15,000) in the Federal State of Brandenburg in Germany, suffered many years of decay of its architectural heritage whilst part of Eastern Germany. It lost both population and businesses. Since 1990 the local administration has tried to combat these losses. The town still possessed a rich architectural, historic and cultural heritage, and has well preserved walls and many old buildings, and a castle. The town is also the site of the famous Battle of Wittstock during the 30 Years War with a permanent exhibition in the castle which draws in many tourist visitors. As Mayor, Herr Gehrman, has been very keen to promote the town as a centre for the hinterland of villages and rural area and put Wittstock firmly back on the map. He refers to the town as a '**metropole**' and a place performing the role that it has always done. It is much smaller than the larger towns and cities which are now the only the type of settlements that attract the word 'metropoles' yet small towns like Wittstock carry out the same role of providing jobs, retail centre, services and education and acting as a transport hub but on a much smaller scale. This has led to a renewed view of the town and encouraged neighbouring small towns too. Like all small towns they still face threats of more centralisation but small towns are fighting back.



Walled town of Wittstock, Germany

7.7 Tourism

7.7.1 Tourism opportunities cover many aspects and hundreds of both large and small towns will have exploited their assets to bring in visitors who will spend money in the towns and help improve the local economy.

7.7.2 It can cover celebrating the local food and drink of the area; recognising the passing of the seasons – geographical and religious; celebrating the birth of famous saints or artists, musicians; or specific events on music, film or literature or keeping alive folk traditions and local culture; or historic events that relate to the town or events to mark the 1000 or 500 years of the town's foundation. . It can exploit specific interests such as heritage or sports events. Tourism can be aimed at world-wide audiences or be quite local. There are hundreds of examples that are already regular calendar events but many other small towns have assets that could be exploited.

7.7.3 The tourist season is no longer limited to Summer holidays and package holidays or Winter sports holidays but covers the whole year with day visits and weekends and short breaks. For a long time tourist businesses have been trying to spread the season into the Spring and Autumn. The impact of the recession has reduced the visitor market but long term the prospects will still be there.

(a) **Distinctiveness and Heritage**

7.7.4 No-one can deny that there are wonderful historic large towns and that cities exist such as Rome, Prague, Salzburg, Seville and Segovia which are highly regarded all over the world. However the sheer wealth of history and local building materials and different architectural styles are demonstrated in thousands of small towns throughout Europe. Small rural towns have generally managed to retain their distinctiveness and this is true for the majority of European countries.

7.7.5 The study of heritage assets in SE England towns demonstrated that more than half (56%) still maintain a distinctiveness which reflects local building materials and architectural styles from different periods of history - very well suited to be significant heritage tourist destinations. In many parts of European states, the proportion of heritage assets in small towns may be greater and clustered in some localities. However, if the percentage found in South East England was applied to the whole of Europe it would equate to a very considerable number of towns having tourism potential – 56% would equate to several thousand European towns. Many of them already will be performing in this role but others may be able to follow their example. They provide good places to visit and become local or regional centres of rural tourism based on their attractiveness

7.7.6 These small towns are the backbone of rural areas, serving a hinterland of villages, hamlets and countryside. Heritage tourism in these small towns can also advertise other local attractions in the surrounding rural areas. Such towns are often hubs of public transport and could also promote sustainable ways of accessing them, although some respondents in the Opinion Survey were worried about poor public transport.

7.7.7 The promotion of such towns with good quality heritage if promoted well could attract new private sector investment and attract new businesses to set up in their town.

7.7.8 Many small towns across Europe have been recognised as exceptional examples of architecture and history and included in the **UNESCO World Heritage List**: They attract many millions of visitors from all parts of the globe. They include Trogir (population 11,000) in Croatia; Provins (population 11,600) in France; Quedlinburg (population 28,000) in Germany; Corfu Town (population 28,000) in Greece; Valletta (population 7,800) in Malta; Sighisoara (population 26,000) in Romania; and Banska Stiavnica (population 10,000), Levoca (population 14,500) and Bardejov (population 30,000) in Slovakia. Individual World Heritage Buildings can have the same affect – such as the famous Roman Amphitheatre in the small town of Orange (population 29,000) in France.

7.7.9 Architecture itself is celebrated in Slovenia with an annual event held every November with a conference known as the **Piran Days of Architecture** staged in the attractive old town of Piran (population 4,000) on the Adriatic Coast.

(b) **Widening the Choice Away from the ‘Honey Pots**

7.7.10 It is not just the most well-known places that are now promoting their assets. Spreading tourism promotions to places outside the tourism ‘honey pots’ will help improve the economy of not only the regions but the country too. At the Third International Rural Tourism Congress held in Croatia in 2012 the **Island of Nin** (with its small historic town on a tiny island linked to the mainland by a bridge) presented the work they have been doing to attract tourists to their town – which has much to offer – although not in the top ‘league’ of historic towns in Croatia.



Island of Nin, Croatia

(c) Festivals, Pageants and Carnivals

7.7.11 Festivals, Pageants and Carnivals are usually annual events and celebrate a variety of things. Whilst there are costs to stage an event it will bring in money from those who visit, and also help put the town on the map and can lead to repeat visits. Food festivals have already been mentioned above, but events can celebrate the different periods of the year- such as the world famous **Binche Carnival in Belgium** (town population just over 30,000) held in the days before Ash Wednesday to chase away the cold and evil spirits and welcome Spring; or the **Russian Winter Festivals** held in towns across Russia to celebrate the cold Russian Winters.

7.7.12 They can celebrate important local historic events. Re-enactments of battles are

7.7.14 Many small towns now hold annual music events such as the **Gränna Blue Grass Music Festival, Sweden** held in the very small town of **Gränna** (population 2,500) situated on the shores of Lake Vättern. The small town of Guca, Serbia (population only 2,000) in southern part of the country hosts an annual **Trumpet Festival** which attracts more than 600,000 visitors. The small town of **Kremnica, Slovakia** (population 5,700) hosts the European Organ Festival.

7.7.15 Many festivals are held to preserve the traditions of the country where they are held as these may otherwise disappear. For instance, the Czech Republic stages an annual International Folklore Festival in the small town of **Straznice in Moravia** (population 5,800) and the very small town of **Kazimierz Dolny**, (population 3,500) in central Poland hosts an annual Festival of Folk Bands and Songs to promote Polish culture and traditions. Folk festivals abound in the Baltic Republics – for instance that held in the small attractive town of **Voru** (population 14,500) in Estonia; and the town of **Talsi** (population 11,300) in Latvia hosts many local events to celebrate their local culture. English folk music is celebrated annually in the **Furry Day festival** in Helston (population 9,700) and the **'Obby 'Oss Festival** in Padstow (population 3,000) both small towns in Cornwall, England.

held in many towns such as the **Battle of Grunwald** in the small town of Grunwald, Germany (population 15,000), a battle in the Polish Lithuanian Teutonic War of 1410.

7.7.13 Events can be more generic, not related to the town's history but topics which have become popular. Literature is celebrated by the **Struga Poetry Festival in Macedonia** held annually in the small town of Struga (population 16,000) situated on Lake Ohrid; and the **Welsh Annual Hay Book Festival** is held every year in the small town of Hay on Wye (population of under 2,000) where life has almost been given over to book shops. Both are international events.



Trumpet Statue, Guca, Serbia



Folk Festival in Straznice in the Czech Republic

7.7.16 Film festivals abound all over Europe and small towns have joined in too. For example **The Finland Midnight Sun Film Festival** held in Sodankyla (population 9,000) situated in the Arctic Circle

(d) Tourist Trails

7.7.17 Many countries have been setting up tourist trails and many will go through small towns which could benefit from visitors who walk, cycle or drive these recommended routes.

7.7.18 A theme route called the '**Romantic Road**' was devised in 1950 in Germany and it applies to 350 kilometres of highway between the major towns of Wurzburg and Fussen in southern Germany. It links many small towns with the most well-known being **Rothenburg ob der Tauber** (population nearly 11,000) in the Federal State of Bavaria in Germany which is a classic example of a beautiful Medieval town and attracts thousands of visitors every year. There are many other small towns with well-preserved historic cores which have benefitted **from** being along its route including Dinkesbuhl (population 11,500); Donauworth (population 18,000); Landsberg am Lech (population 27,000) and Nordlingen (population 24,000).

7.7.19 A specialist **Cultural Tourism Trail in Romania** has been researched and promoted by ECOVAST Romania. It is designed to highlight Byzantine influences and highlights the religious and civil architecture north of the River Danube to link with Byzantine heritage south of the Danube where the heritage is well known.

7.7.20 The next step will be to try and integrate these trails into the repertoire of cultural routes proposed by the Council of Europe.

7.7.21 Whilst the monuments that have been researched for this route lie generally outside the towns the route does pass through many small towns: for instance the Princely Church of Curtea de Arges is situated within the town of Curtea de Arges (population around 30,000) which is one of the oldest towns in Wallachia; and the Negru Voda Monastery lies just outside the town of Campalung (population also 30,000), and the town of Sinaia (population 14,500) which is also a mountain resort is built around the Monastery of Sinaia. Increased tourism visits using this tourism trail to see these Byzantine highlights should also benefit the towns nearby.



Princely Church of Curtea de Arges



Negru Voda Monastery, Campalung

(e) Celebrating Local Industries

7.7.22 Many mining towns are trying to exploit the history of their industry – they can be former centres of gold, silver, copper, iron ore or mercury mining. The towns have invested in local museums displaying photographs of the people involved and artefacts from the mines to portray their former glory. Many former salt mining towns abound in the Alps in France, Switzerland and Austria, now with famous salt mines to visit. The town of **Idar-Oberstein** in Germany (population 30,000) was a place where semi-precious gemstones of agate and jasper were mined. The mine is open to the public and the town is devoted to locally carved items in a range of stones. The town still boasts two schools for cutting gems and attracts students from all over the world.

(f) Celebrating Famous People

7.7.23 Many **famous people** have been born or lived in small towns and many municipalities are promoting this to attract visitors and usually have developed local museums to illustrate the famous person. A religious example is the small town of **Assisi in Italy** (population of 27,000) which is in the Province of Perugia in Umbria and lies on the flanks of Monte Subasi. It is historically famous as the birthplace of St Francis who founded the Franciscan Order of Monks and of St Clare who founded the Order of Nuns called the Poor Sisters. The town is revered as a Holy Place and attracts many pilgrims.

7.7.24 Famous authors, composers, even politicians who were born or lived in small towns can be celebrated and anniversaries of their birth or death can be used to host a special event, a pageant or carnival.

(g) Niche Markets

7.7.25 Many niche markets are being exploited and different specialised uses for small towns have been developed. For example artists, potters and artisan craftspeople have taken up residence in many small attractive towns; if they become well known they can get thousands of visitors who are interested in painting or pots. **Szentendre, Hungary** (population 25,000), an attractive walled town on the banks of the Danube, north of Budapest has become renowned for its artisan, particularly pottery workshops. **St Ives, Cornwall, England** (population 11,100), often called the jewel of the north Cornish coast with picturesque harbour is beloved by artists. The small town has managed to attract a very large investment recognising its centre for artists as the famous Tate Gallery of London built a branch gallery in the town which is used for both local and national exhibitions.

7.7.26 The small town of **Retz** (population 4,800) in Lower Austria has developed into a **major conference centre**. The local hotel which was formerly a chateau on the edge of the small town centre has expanded considerably to accommodate major conferences with staying delegates. The town itself is historic and attractive with a main square surrounded by traditional building and has walls and the remains of a former abbey and wine caves under the town. The many delegates who stay there bring profitability into the town through their spending.



Conference hotel in Retz, Austria

(h) Sporting Activities

7.7.27 Many small towns in the Alps are dedicated to the Winter season where winter sports is huge industry. The small town of Gstaad in Switzerland is a classic example of this. **Gstaad** (population 4,000) also attracts many Summer visitors as it has a beautiful setting in the Bernese Alps. Winter sports is not exclusively limited to the Alps and Winter resorts are found wherever there is a snowy winter and hills to ski down for example the small town of **Anykscaia** (population 11,900) in Lithuania and **Otepaa** (population 2,400) in Estonia which are both ski resorts.

(i) Making Visitors Feel Welcome

7.7.28 Visitors need to feel welcome if they are to come back or tell their friends about the town. Clear signposting helps them find their way around the town, particularly where they can park. Convenient, secure car parks and clean public toilets are essential. One town in England made this a priority - **Sandwich** (population 4,500) in Kent revamped their public toilets which are now manned and make visitors welcome. They won the National Public Loo Award for their efforts in 2010.

(j) Recording the towns assets for culture and heritage

7.7.29 ECOVAST in Austria has undertaken surveys of all its small towns and has produced a Register of these small towns listing the historic and cultural assets. This survey has established a matrix for the character of small historic towns across Austria. It looks at criteria for a historic core; criteria needed to provide a 'central function'; and identifies those specific historic and cultural assets which give the town its unique identity. Each criteria is graded as 'strong or good', medium or of low impact. This work can be used by others who wish to do further comparisons and those who are developing proposals for new investments in small historic towns.

7.8 Developing Renewable Energy

7.8.1 The small town of **Güssing** (population 3,700) in Burgenland, Austria took the brave decision in 1990 to achieve the complete abandonment of fossil-fuel based energy. Burgenland had always been the poorest and least developed region of Austria and Güssing was one of its poorer towns. It did not have good infrastructure – no railway or motorway - and was not attractive to businesses. Some 70% of its working population commuted to Vienna or other parts of Austria and the town realised that there was a substantial capital outflow out of the town, including the town's energy which was all brought in from outside. Yet the surrounding forestland covering 45% of the landmass remained largely unused.

7.8.2 The 'reformers' decided that they would produce the energy locally and sell it to the citizens. Public buildings were the first to stop using fossil fuels and the first wood burning plant was built. Later a facility was built to convert rapeseed into car fuel. Wood chips were gassified and the by-product of heat used to make warm water for a district heating system.

7.8.3 The initiative has attracted many new enterprises providing many new jobs in the town. Any profits from renewable energy are re-invested. It is also essential to the scheme that the surrounding forests need to be managed to provide resources for the future.

7.8.4 The renewable energy project spread to other parts of the region and led to 27 decentralised power plants in Güssing county.

7.8.5 However innovative Güssing has been, it also demonstrates one of the challenges facing small towns. The initial funding for the energy project has come to an end, yet the work needs to continue to be supported as it is not totally self-financing. The source of new funding is proving difficult to find.



Wood Gasifier, Güssing, Austria

7.9 Sharing services

7.9.1 It is clear from the research on SE England towns that they had a good range of community services. The towns with the best economic assets had an excellent level of community services and even the middle ranked towns for economic assets had reasonable community services. These services provide not only for the town itself but for their hinterlands of villages. However, although this picture looks rosy, there is a threat of losing some of these services to further centralisation or removal of some services through declining local authority budgets where difficult decisions are needed to balance budgets when faced with major budget cuts. Many of the services looked at are dependent upon public sector funding. If small towns are to remain or become more sustainable then the level of community services provided at local level is a critical factor. There are many examples where towns are combining their services under one roof rather than in separate buildings

7.9.2 : The small town of Tenterden, Kent, England (population around 8,000) has been able to make use of an empty shop premises in the High Street to bring together several services and put them into a shared centre called **The Tenterden Gateway**. The building now includes the town library, the Post Office and has also enabled a drop-in centre to be set up for the local authority to deal with enquiries which saves local residents making a round-trip journey of more than 20 miles. It has also enabled a new business to locate in the town as it uses the former library building.



Tenterden Gateway, Kent, England

7.10 Working together

7.10.1 The European Survey showed the vast number of population across Europe living in small towns where networking could be better exploited to develop a 'common voice' for their concerns, to promote what they have to offer and to influence future policy development in both the European Union and the Council of Europe.

7.10.2 Several countries already have networks of small towns where they exchange views and best practice. In 2011 a newly founded **European Federation of Towns and Municipalities of the European Union (CTME)** was set up to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and exchange of experience among its members. Its members include associations from the member states of France; Germany: Hungary; Italy; Poland, Romania and Spain. However many of these associations are not just limited to 'small towns'. **Germany** includes villages with populations of 1,000 and large towns of more than 100,000 too; whereas the **Polish Union of Small Towns** represents only settlements between 20,000 and 50,000.

7.10.3 An **Association of Municipalities of the Republic of Croatia** was founded in 2002 by the municipalities to promote and protect their common interests. By 2013 there were 274 members as it includes very small settlements as well as large towns.

7.10.4 In the United Kingdom there is an organisation called **Action for Market Towns**. It is a membership organisation which provides information and advice, examples of best practice and makes national representation on behalf of the smaller towns. Another is the **Small Towns for Tomorrow** – a group of concerned individuals, practitioners, academics, representatives from both central and local government and the private sector who wish to develop and promote a greater understanding of the issues facing small towns across the United Kingdom. ECOVAST is represented on this group.

7.10.5 There are also many other specialist organisations which are pan-European or for smaller areas such as countries or regions. The European Association of Historic Towns and Regions was formed by the Council of Europe in 1999. There is a European Walled Towns Association dedicated to sustainable development of walled towns, walled cities and fortified historic Towns in Europe. There is an Association of Small Historic Towns and Villages in the United Kingdom and in Austria.

Wittstock in Germany - already referred to above – is also part of a local network. It was a founder member of a group of historic towns – called the Working Association of Towns with Historic Centres of the State of Brandenburg, in Germany. It was founded in 1992 and now has 31 member towns whose aim is to preserve and revitalise their town centres. They hold conferences and meetings and exchange advice and information. They are part of the major programme Urban Building Preservation of the German Federal Ministry of Transport, Housing and Urban Development. The German National Committee for the Preservation of Historic Monuments awarded Wittstock the German Prize for the Protection of Historic Monuments.

7.10.6 The above very varied examples are spread across Europe and demonstrate what towns have done or can do to improve their economies.

7.11 Making Use of Landscape Assets

7.11.1 The quality and distinctiveness of small towns is not only about built heritage. Small towns are an integral part of the cultural landscapes of the rural areas of Europe. The dense sea of roofs, towers, domes, and chimneys of small rural towns are small enough in scale to be an attractive part of a general countryside view.

7.11.2 Many countries of Europe have designated their best landscapes as National Parks or Regional Parks and they often have formal trails for walkers, cyclists and horse riders and areas set aside as a visitor centre or beauty spots. Many small towns lie in or on the edge of such areas and can capitalise on these assets.

7.11.3 The landscape setting of a small town is also a critical part of the general ambiance of the small town itself and adds interest to the views around the towns which can generally be seen from many points within the town.

7.11.4 Tourist visitors are drawn to mountain areas and the main urban and larger towns will be known but there are a myriad of small municipalities that could be enjoyed and the towns benefit from their visits. **Mountains and hills** can dominate the landscape of many small towns, throughout the Alps, the Carpathians; the Appenines and the Pyrenees areas of Europe. The **Tuscan town of Volterra, Italy** (population 11,000) is a classic example. It lies in an impregnable position, built on a high plateau with a dramatic cliff dropping down to the land below and enclosed by volcanic hills. It is a very ancient town dating back to Etruscan times and its walled medieval core is atmospheric with everything made from a yellow-grey stone. The Etruscans and the Romans mined alabaster (a form of crystallized chalk) from the rocks surrounding the town which was used for sculpting. Some artisans still work with alabaster in the town today. Many of the bastide towns of south-west France were built on hill tops for defence. The pretty small town of **Mirepoix, France** (population only 3,000) lies in the valley of the Var in Arriege and the views from the town are dominated by the foothills of the Pyrenees. The town has the normal grid iron street plan of a bastide but it is dominated by the vast arcaded Place de Couverts with exposed wooden beams which have 150 individually carved wooden heads.

7.11.5 Millions of tourists visit the seaside resorts or the islands of the Dalmatian coast or tour the famous Italian and Swiss Lakes or go on river cruises or take river trips. The major towns will probably be very well known but there are lots of small towns which lie on the coast or lakeside which could encourage people to visit them as well. The water itself forms a dominant feature for small towns on islands, along the coast or on a lakeside or a major river. The following examples are just a few of the hundreds across Europe.

7.11.6 **Honfleur in France** (population 8,000) lies in the Calvados Department in northern France and is a picturesque port, favoured by artists as well as tourists for its houses covered in grey-blue slates surrounding the harbour. Another is the lively seaside resort of **Palanga, Lithuania** (population of 17,600) on the Baltic coast.

7.11.7 **Ascona in Switzerland** (population 5,400) lies in the Canton of Ticino and is a lakeside town on the shore of Lake Maggiore. It is a popular destination for tourists. The small town of **Bled, Slovenia** (population 5,200) is dominated by the small lake of the same name.

7.11.8 The islands of the spectacular Dalmatian coast of Croatia are dotted with many small towns such as **Krk** (population 6,200) on the Island of Krk.

7.11.9 **Ponte de Lima in Portugal** (population only 3,000) is a river town and is one of the oldest towns in Portugal and the first town in that country to get a Municipal Charter. Its townscape is dominated by a long medieval bridge across the River Lima.



Lake Bled and Bled, Slovenia



Ponte de Lima, Portugal

7.11.10 Landscape is not just about the town setting it includes the internal landscaping of open spaces within the town.

7.11.11 The **Swiss Heritage Society** honours municipalities which can show special achievements in the development of townscape of settlements through its **Wakker Prize**. In 2013 this was awarded to the small town of **Sion** (population 30,000) for the way it put both landscape and architecture at the centre of its development. The town is historic but the way it designed its public squares in the town centre enhanced the value of its modern architectural heritage – one of the most significant in Switzerland. The renewal process started with a competition to redesign the Place du Midi, and was followed by the redesign of squares in front of schools so that they became highly valued district squares which can be used by everyone.

8. Current and Emerging European Policy

8.1 No specific policies exist for small towns. Mountainous areas are recognised in policies for less favoured areas; the rural fringe around major metropolitan areas have a voice through the PURPLE network and their specific needs and opportunities are being recognised in the European Union.

8.2 The development of more integrated economic development policies for urban and rural areas is being actively pursued in the European Union through a group consisting of urban and rural networks (called RURBAN) to help develop the debate and this group is supported by both the Director General for Regional and Urban Policy and the Director General for Agriculture and Rural Development. ECOVAST is a member of RURBAN.

8.3 The European Union has been working with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which is an international body with membership from 34 countries across the world including the European Union, set up to identify economic problems, discuss and analyse them and promote policies to solve them. The OECD has carried out a series of case studies on rural-urban partnerships and is submitting its findings to their working parties for Territorial Indicators and Territorial Policy in Rural and Urban Areas for discussion and approval. The OECD case studies have been the basis for a series of conferences staged in 2012-13 to discuss the findings which in turn may influence new EU policy.

8.4 2014 will see the start of a new 7 year programme period for the European Union which will have a significant impact and offer potential support for projects in 30 states. The new approach will use the Common Strategic Framework for combining funds for Regional, Social, Rural and Fisheries Funds in Community Led Local Development. This gives opportunities to promote the well-being of small towns but a lot will depend on each Member State and what they decide to implement.

8.5 If post 2014 there is to be an emphasis on rural areas linking with urban areas, this paper on the importance of small towns serving a hinterland of villages and countryside should be of value to the debate as these small towns are a critical link between urban and rural areas.

8.6 Small towns meet several of the key '**Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent**' set out by the Council of Europe. These guiding principles have been accepted by all the Ministers for Regional/Spatial Planning (CEMAT) except for Belarus, including all the countries covered by the ECOVAST pan-European Study. The particular planning policies numbers 2, 7 and 9 are specifically appropriate – the ones which:

- encourage urban development generated by functions and improving the relationship between the town and the countryside
- enhance the cultural heritage as a factor for development
- encourage high quality, sustainable tourism

8.7 The importance of Europe's small towns and their opportunities to contribute to local, regional and national economies therefore need to be promoted actively in each member state and form part of policies for these areas.

9 Conclusions on the importance of small towns

9.1 Small rural towns are an important element in the settlement hierarchy of any region or country, and are a vital asset to Europe. .

9.2 Small towns are the backbone of rural areas serving thousands of villages and the wider countryside and are essential to them. Thriving small towns contribute to the well-being of rural areas that surround them.

9.3 Small towns are places for businesses providing local jobs which make a significant contribution to the economy of a local area, region and nationally. They also offer opportunities for new business development.

9.4 The thousands of small towns across Europe and many thousands more very small towns all hinterlands of villages and countryside therefore have an influence over most rural areas.

9.5 Small towns are an important link between rural and urban areas and a critical element in any urban/rural partnerships.

9.6 However, they have already faced many changes and face future challenges.

9.7 However there are many opportunities which they can exploit to improve their future sustainability.

9.8 Small towns are highly distinctive - they are a critical part of our European cultural heritage and ably demonstrate its history. They reflect the variety of different styles and local building materials across the whole of Europe.

9.9 Small rural towns have many specific heritage assets providing an opportunity to strengthen their existing tourism role or develop as future centres for rural tourism.

9.10 Neither the current urban nor the rural policies in Europe are specifically appropriate for small towns. ECOVAST wishes to promote a specific set of policies in both the European Union and the Council of Europe which reflect their uniqueness and special needs; to maintain their character; and enable them to continue to serve as rural service centres.

9.11 Next Steps

As well as seeking to influence the European Union and the Council of Europe, it is hoped that his paper could prove useful to individual countries and to regions and their individual policy makers.

9.12 The ten ECOVAST National Sections will use it to spread the message about the importance of small towns in their countries and influence their Members of the European Parliament and local authorities who are responsible for policies affecting the development in small towns.

9.13 The paper will be sent to PREPARE who have been working jointly ECOVAST on the RURBAN meetings and attended the Rural Urban Partnership conferences. The paper will also be sent to members of the RURBAN network. It will also go to the European Rural University (APURE) an organisation that stages a 'university event' every two years to discuss rural issues affecting Europe. Members of ECOVAST have been members of and working with APURE over the years since 1989.

10. List of Events on rural small towns

10.1 There have been many events over the last few years discussing small towns. There were 2 symposiums on small towns prior to the Retz conference which led to this body of research being developed. The first symposium was in Murau in 1998 in Styria and the second in Waidhofen in 2002 in Lower Austria. Another event on small towns was held in Wroclaw, Poland in 2004. The conference in Retz, Austria held in 2005 - sponsored by SEEDA and ECOVAST led to the development of the ECOVAST ASSET project and several pieces of research. Many events followed which had small towns as a major part of their discussions. All these events, presentations and discussions have been used in the development of this ECOVAST paper.

- ECOVAST workshop held in Makarska, Croatia in 2006
 - Small towns conference Interreg III N'n Periphery Programme held in Jyvaskyla, Finland in 2006
 - European Rural University event in Mezőtúr, Hungary in 2006
 - ECOVAST conference on Rural Development held in Bratislava, Slovakia in 2006
 - ECOVAST Poland Conference on regions; space and tourism in Bialowieza, Poland in 2007
 - Study visit to Energy Town, Güssing in Austria organised by ECOVAST in 2007
 - UK ECOVAST Study visit to Richmond, Yorkshire in 2007
 - Regional Studies Association conference held in Lisbon, Portugal in 2007
 - ECOVAST conference on small towns held in Samobor, Croatia in 2007
 - Conference on Competitiveness and European Integration held in Cluj, Romania in 2007
 - Rural Tourism Conference held in Hvar, Croatia in 2007
 - University of Gloucestershire Field Course held in Sardinia, Italy in 2008
 - ECOVAST workshop held in St Veit, Carinthia, Austria in 2008
 - Rural Futures Conference, University of Plymouth 2008
 - Government La Rioja Small Town conference held in Rioja, Spain in 2008
 - ECOVAST conference on small towns held at Wittstock, Germany in 2008
 - ECOVAST Symposium on small towns held in Grieskirchen, Austria in 2009
 - ECOVAST conference on small towns held Mošćenice, Croatia in 2009
 - Europa Nostra 'Saving European Historic Towns and Villages' held in Taormina Sicily in 2009
 - Irish Studies Symposium held in Galway, Ireland in 2009
 - ECOVAST Rural Development held in Ventnor, Isle of Wight, England in 2010
 - Small towns conference held in Ivanic Grad, Croatia in 2011
 - Conference on Rural Tourism held in Osijek, Croatia in 2012
 - ECOVAST meeting in Witzhausen, Germany in 2012
 - EUROGITES Conference on European Tourism held in Romania 2012
 - ECOVAST Conference on Rural Buildings & Small Towns held in Hungary 2013
 - Culture and Rural Tourism Conference held in Heraklion, Greece in 2013
 - Rural-Urban Partnerships conference held in Bologna, Italy in 2013
- and will be discussed in November 2013 at the*
- *11th session of European Rural University to be held in Perigueux, France in 2013*

11 The European Council for the Village and Small Town (ECOVAST)

11.1 ECOVAST was founded in 1984 to foster the economic, social and cultural vitality and the administrative identity of rural communities throughout Europe and to safeguard the sensitive and imaginative renewal of the built and natural environments of such communities. ECOVAST has members from many countries across Europe, both individuals and networks.

11.2 It is managed by an International Committee that meets at least once a year and stages an Annual Assembly. It has 10 National Sections – in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and the United Kingdom which focus on local rural issues in those countries.

11.3 Its international work focuses on landscape, rural buildings, rural tourism and small towns. ECOVAST has advanced its support of small towns since 2005 through the development of a project called 'Action to Strengthen Small European Towns' (ASSET)

11.4 ECOVAST is an International NGO and a member of the EC DG Agri Rural Development Advisory Group and has been closely associated with the Council of Europe. ECOVAST was also a founder member of PREPARE, and is a member of Europa Nostra and Eurogites.

THE EVIDENCE BASE

12 Introduction to the Evidence Base

12.1 The evidence base which follows is taken from six separate studies carried out by ECOVAST as part of the ASSET Project – using both opinion and empirical surveys.

12.2 Opinion surveys were carried out in 2006 and 2009 using networks and known rural contacts in various countries across Europe – set out in Section 14.

12.3 Empirical surveys of data carried between 2008 and 2010 include a European level study to determine the number of small towns across Europe and how many people live in them – set out in Section 13; followed by three in-depth surveys of different assets (economic, social and heritage) of 165 small towns in South East England - set out in Sections 15,16 and 17.

THE ASSET RESEARCH

13. Study of Towns across Europe - their size and potential importance

13.1 Purpose of the Study

This study set out to find out how many people in Europe live in smaller towns by looking at the range of population level of larger and smaller towns/cities across Europe.

13.2 It hoped to establish how important these smaller towns are and what kind of effective voice they could have in Europe. Parallel research was being carried out to establish whether they are likely to suffer from a common set of problems (Opinion Surveys in Section 14) and what kind of assets small towns have (Surveys of South East Towns in England in Sections 15,16 and 17).

13.3. Research Area

The study covers all geographical Europe – both the states within the European Union and those outside it - apart from European Russia and European Turkey. . Places outside Europe which are part of European States have not been included, but the Vatican City State with a population of less than 1,000 and Gibraltar have been. The states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia - although Members of the Council of Europe - are considered to be geographically part of Asia rather than Europe and are also not included.

13.4 Methodology

The study identified towns according to the size of their populations and split them into several categories or size-bands: Larger cities/towns were split into 3 size-bands: where the population is over 1 million; where the population is over 250,000 but below 1 million or where the population is over 50,000 but below 250,000. Smaller towns/cities were split into 4 size-bands; where the population is 40,000 but below 50,000; where the population is 30,000 but below 40,000; where the population is 20,000 but below 30,000 and finally where the population is 10,000 but below 20,000. These divisions into sub-categories will allow for different amalgamations.

13.5 Can a 'small town' be defined ?:

ECOVAST feels strongly that there are some towns which could be defined as 'small towns' which are found throughout Europe and which are essential to the well-being of rural areas. ECOVAST uses both size and function to define them as well as their particular assets of distinctiveness and contribution to rural landscapes. Small rural towns are places which provide for both themselves and their hinterlands. They provide local markets, shops – often having representatives of the major food chains, and some branches of 'magnet traders', as well as acting as a centre for businesses activity with a wide range of services which can include administration, leisure and secondary education. Not all small towns will have all these but will provide enough to make them rural service centres for their surrounding hinterland.

13.6 The study does not set out to define the limit between a 'larger' town and a 'smaller' town. The ECOVAST Opinion Surveys suggested that the upper limit on size of a 'small town' is not uniform across European opinion. The responses from 22 countries gave 12 different answers. But ECOVAST does recognize that it is smaller towns that suffer most from centralisation and loss of services.

13.7 ECOVAST also felt that all settlements with a population of 10,000 or above would have the functions of a 'town' and this was also borne out in the Study of South East Towns where all towns with populations above 10,000 provided all the functions of towns.

13.8 The Survey

The only database which covers the whole of Europe which is comparable between countries is Taseo.com. This is a database of geographic co-ordinate information for more than 2.6 million towns/cities globally. Even with Taseo it is difficult to get a comparable picture of settlements much below 10,000 for many European countries and some secondary sources have been used. However 10,000 is not regarded as the lower level of a small town. This is far from the case. ECOVAST fully recognises that there are many very small towns below 10,000 functioning as rural service centres – for instance in Germany and France. In the more remote, less densely populated countries the size of towns is generally much smaller – in Finland small towns often have populations below 2,000 people. Even in the study of towns in the more crowded region of South East England, 72% of the small towns identified had populations of less than 10,000, with more than half of these with populations below 5,000. Without major new survey work it is impossible to identify the exact number of places with populations below 10,000 which today provide the functions of a 'town'. Many historic towns with Charters from the Middle Ages now act as villages rather than provide the functions of a town serving a hinterland.

13.9. Results

Altogether the study found 7,082 towns / cities across Europe.

(i) Larger towns

There are 1,341 towns with populations of 50,000 or more with **219,600,400** people living in them - which is **37.5% of the total population of the survey area.**

(ii) Smaller towns

The survey found 5,790 towns where the populations were less than 50,000 and they had 123,362,000 people living in them (21.0% of the population of the area surveyed); made up of

- 441 towns with populations between 40 and 50,000;
- 769 towns with populations between 30 and 40,000;
- 1,389 towns with populations between 20 and 30,000; and
- 3,191 towns (2,740 in the EU and 451 in the rest of Europe) with populations 10 and 20,000.

Graph showing different sizes of towns

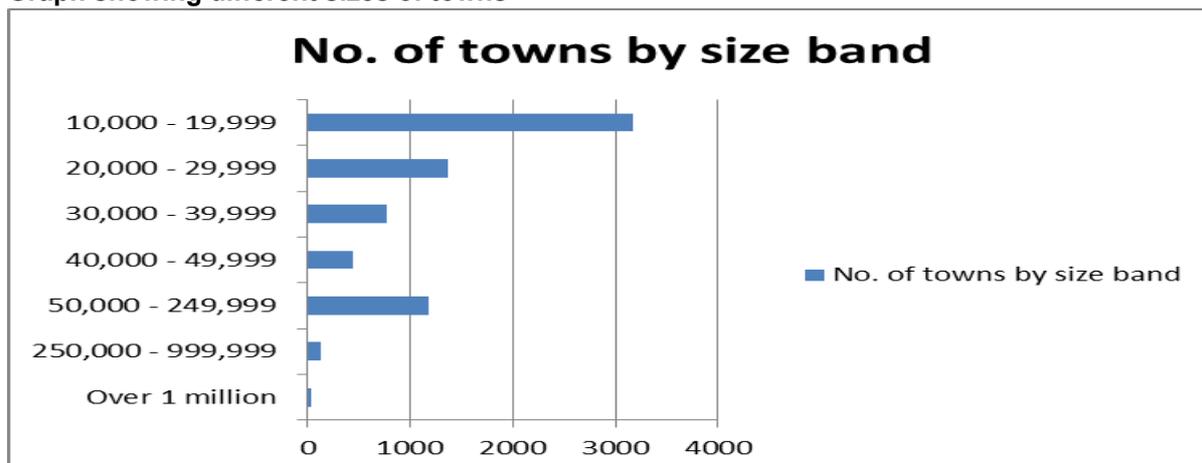
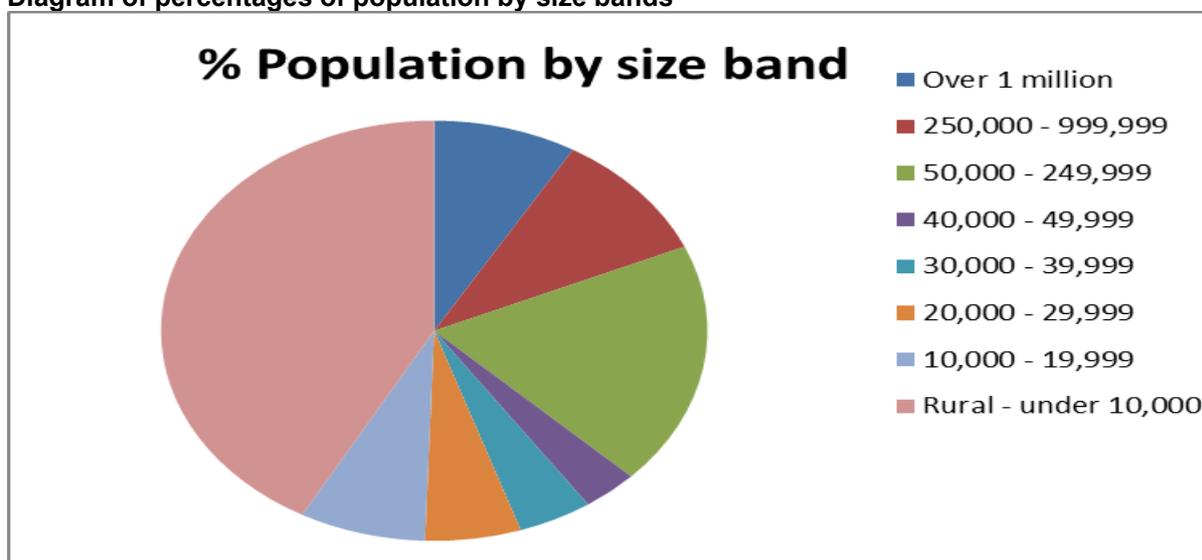


Diagram of percentages of population by size bands



(iii) Rural Areas

The remaining **41.5%** of the population of Europe (242,984,000 million people) live in settlements below 10,000, which include very small towns, villages, hamlets and the countryside. The proportion is 41.0% in the European Union countries but 45.7% in the countries in the rest of Europe. However it is recognised that there are many vary small towns within these 'rural' figures.

13.10 Conclusions

(i) More than 80% of the towns in Europe are below 50,000 population size. In the two smallest categories there are 1,389 towns 20,000 and 29,999; and 3,191 towns between 10,000 and 19,999, together making up 65% of the total number of towns in Europe.

(ii) More than 78 million people live in these 4,580 small towns/cities with populations of less than 30,000 making up 13% of the total population of Europe. This is larger than the population of any country in Europe except Germany. Many are run by strong municipalities which should enable them to have a much stronger voice in Europe to help shape future policy and avoid a total dominance of an urban based approach.

(iii) There are nearly 243 million people or 41.5% of the total population of Europe living in places where the population is less than 10,000. This will include many much smaller rural towns as well as villages and the countryside.

14 Opinion Surveys - 2006-9

14.1 Introduction and Purpose of First Opinion Survey

The work was part of the ASSET project of ECOVAST. There were 2 separate Opinion Surveys seeking the views of rural networks across Europe about small towns. The first survey was carried out in 2006-7

14.2 Methodology

A questionnaire was compiled and sent out to the contacts identified in 30 countries across Europe not just the Member States of the European Union. The questionnaires were then analysed.

14.3 The Survey

A simple database of appropriate rural specialists was compiled using existing ECOVAST contacts; other known networks; the internet of EU and other Country sites which was the basis for asking for opinions. Information was sought on the following topics: Governmental structure of country; the definition of a "small town" (population); whether this includes its hinterland; specific issues of concern to small towns; what support is received and from whom; whether larger towns get preferential treatment; degree of interaction between small town and hinterland and what forms this takes; examples of "good practice"; and what research has been done.

14.4 The Responses

22 countries completed the questionnaire – 21 from EU Member States: Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and England, Scotland and Wales in the United Kingdom; and 1 from Croatia. giving valuable opinions from western, southern, northern, eastern and central Europe.

14.5. The Analysis of the Results

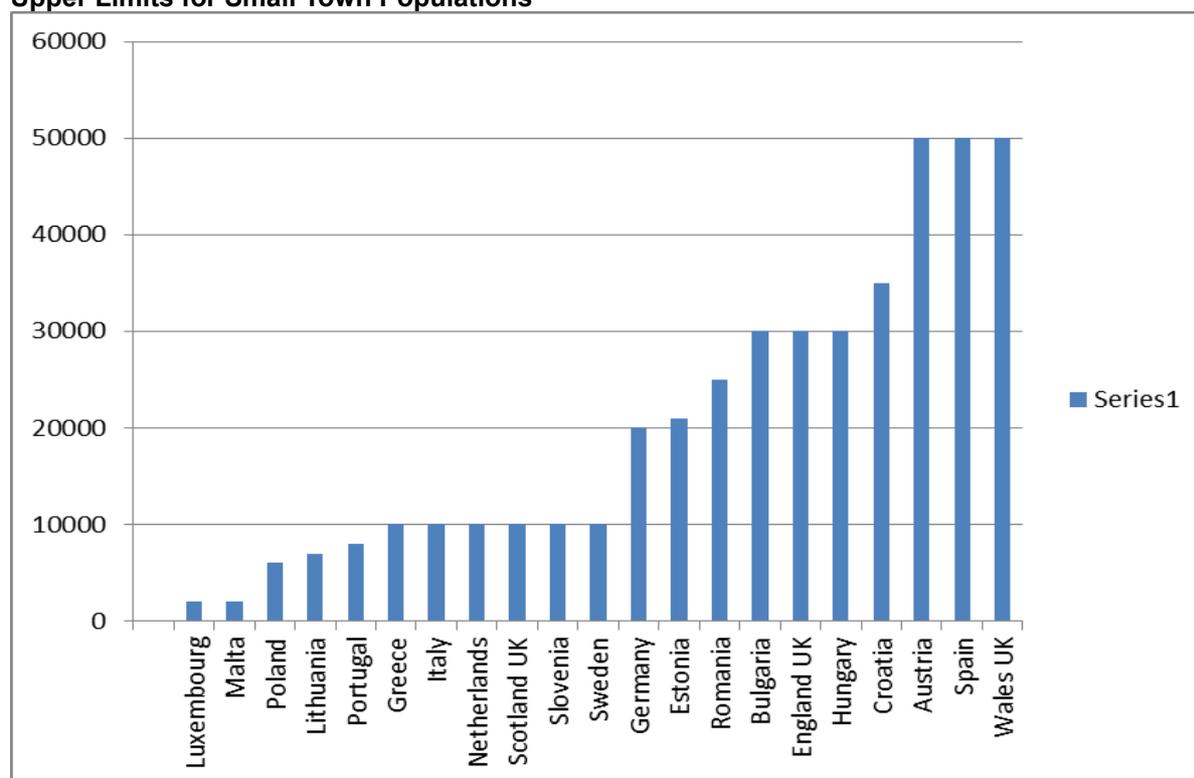
The analysis has indicated that the picture is very complex, with major differences in every aspect of the data collected. The following answers were given to the more detailed questions:

(i) What is the size of a small town?

The variety of answers to this question on the population level they regard as a 'small town' shows great contrasts. There is no simple or specific European definition on what makes a 'small town'.

The graph below illustrates the responses:

Upper Limits for Small Town Populations



- the minimum suggested lower level of population for small towns varied between 200 and 5,000 with many citing 2,000 or 3,000
- the upper population level suggested for a small towns ranged from 3,000 (Luxembourg and Malta) and 50,000 (Austria, Spain and Sweden), with an average of around 25,000.

(ii) Hinterlands

The respondents were almost equally divided between those who wanted figures for small towns to include their hinterland and those which do not. This can, of course, seriously distort the picture – for example in Austria the town of St Veit an der Glan in Carinthia and its hinterland has a population is given as 14,000 but the town itself only has 7,000. The pan European study of small towns referred to in Section 13 used only town populations which does not include their hinterlands.

(iii) The Challenges Small Towns Face

The responses revealed the following concerns: loss of population – in many cases this is particularly true of young people; the loss of facilities; loss of local employment opportunities; the growth of traffic and the consequent demand for car parking; concerns about new developments in their town centres; and the growth of out of town shopping developments. Other factors causing concern included: loss of traditional buildings; weak infrastructure; poor public transport; unemployment generally; land pressure and planning and housing policies

(iv) Out Migration

All respondents reported real concerns about out migration from their small towns, especially of young people. Much of this is to urban areas or to pursue higher education, but few of them return, and this is threatening the demographic balance of many towns.

(v) What Support is there for Small Towns?

The question about national or regional networks for small towns elicited a fascinating range of replies. Some countries, such as Poland, have a Union of Small Towns, some have an Association of Towns (often embracing all sizes of town), whereas others have nothing in place. In some instances support does come from Government related sources, in others not. The support, where it exists, can take many forms - the most usual roles are information exchange and lobbying of some kind, but it can include financial help.

(vi) Interaction between small towns and their hinterland

Most countries reported some degree of interaction between their small towns and hinterland settlements, though Romania and Estonia did not agree, and interestingly, Poland felt this had decreased recently, whereas in Hungary it was a rising trend. The interactions identified included: shopping and markets; locally produced food; leisure provision; tourism; transport facilities and health related provision

(vii) Do larger towns get more support than small towns?

The general view was that they do, although Slovakia gave the response that for them the opposite applies and some were uncertain. Some countries, namely Croatia, England and Germany felt it was variable

(viii) Best Practice Examples

Most respondents could give examples of “good practice” in interaction, though the form and source of this varied. Portugal and Lithuania identified LEADER Programmes; Austria identified the specific example of Güssing with its pioneering self-sufficiency in renewable energy; and Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and the UK gave examples of case studies. The Croatian response was of particular interest as it gave instances of both good and bad practice.

(ix) What Research had they undertaken ?

Research into the challenges faced by small towns and how these might be met had been undertaken in most of the countries sampled, much of it by Universities and similar institutions.

14.6. Conclusions of First Opinion Survey

Overall the information gathered is valuable in showing not only the great variety in responses in the circumstances in each country but also the impressions that there is a lot of activity going on in a piecemeal way.

14.7 The Second Opinion Survey 2009 Introduction and Purpose

Although the initial survey provided an outline of the challenges being faced by small European towns, early in 2009 it became apparent that it would be useful to seek further information specifically on the impact which the economic downturn is having on these vital hubs.

14.8 Methodology

A questionnaire was compiled and sent out in 2009 to the contacts identified in 18 countries across Europe not just the Member States of the European Union. England was not included, because the Commission for Rural Communities (England) had done similar research and could provide us with the information. ECOVAST have worked closely with them. The responses were then analysed.

14.9 The Survey

The topics of the new questionnaire were similar to those in the first phase, but presented in a more focused way to address recent problems of the recession. Questions were asked on specific impacts such as effects on population; facilities; employment; housing; heritage and the impact of “out of town” development. Additional questions were also asked about their concerns of the impact on landscapes around the towns, and their relationships with hinterland settlements. It also sought to establish what support was being provided during the downturn of the economy in Europe.

14.10 The Results

Responses were received from fourteen states - 13 of them being EU Member States: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Slovenia and Sweden; and 1 from Croatia. Some of these were from the same people who had completed the earlier questionnaire, but for some were from new states - Denmark; Lithuania, Scotland - where additional contacts have been made.

14.11 The data from responses was from a well-spread geographical well spread range of countries – from north, south, east and west Europe, and a mix of “old” and “new” EU members.

14.12 Analysis of the Results

The information provided by respondents has given a valuable insight into the impact which the economic downturn is having across Europe. No country has escaped the impact of the recession, but it is evident that its effects have been far more pronounced in some states. For example, Denmark and Poland appear, so far, to have escaped the worse effects of the recession, whereas Hungary, Croatia and Ireland said they have been hit hard.

(i) Loss of jobs

Most respondents commented on loss of jobs – both by the closure of businesses, or reductions in their workforces. The Polish response, however, highlighted a problem not so far encountered elsewhere – the impact of OTHER countries' problems – in this instance, the loss of jobs by factory closures, caused by the economic woes of Germany, where the parent companies are based.

(ii) Loss of retail

Almost all of the states face loss of facilities in small towns, with a particular area of loss being in the retail sector. For some, this is due to small businesses being unable to compete with larger stores in urban centres. There are many empty shop premises and several new developments left half completed. A major concern is related to "out of town" shopping, with two thirds of respondents citing this issue, which they feel is tearing the heart from smaller towns. It might be expected that the recession would have stalled the growth of "out of town" development, but the evidence so far suggests this slowdown has not been marked.

(iii) Tourism and heritage

It is noticeable that countries reliant on tourism are suffering severely. Malta and Croatia both give the decline in this industry as a major concern, with a consequent loss of employment and facilities resulting. Indeed three quarters of the respondents are concerned about the impact of the recession on heritage. Fewer tourists visiting historic buildings which run the risk of becoming disused; fewer being sold or let in a stagnant property market or being lost altogether. The lack of maintenance due to funding constraints by local authorities reducing financial input because of changed priorities.

(iv) Pressures on hinterlands

Half of the respondents expressed concern about increased pressures on the hinterland and landscapes around small towns. Most said that there was increased co-operation between small towns and hinterland settlements recently.

(v) Adverse effect on landscapes

However, it was new development which was causing concerns due to the adverse effects on the landscape – either from new industry; new housing, agricultural change (a notable concern for Italy and Portugal).

(vi) Housing

All states had faced some degree of difficulty, but the extent varies. Most cite a shortage of finance available, but only two have already seen a significant number of house repossessions. A particular problem in Ireland is "over supply" – a housing boom just before the downturn leaving many properties partly completed, or finished, but remain empty

(vii) Support during the downturn

Half of respondents said they had received some help from national or regional government, with others citing EU funds, such as LEADER.

14.13 Conclusions of Second Opinion Survey

(i) All countries reported that they had been affected adversely by the recession

(ii) Many reported on the decline in employment which will have a wider implication not only on the town itself but also on the villages in the hinterland

(iii) The impact which might affect the heritage is particularly worrying as it is heritage tourism that often offers the potential for sustainable visitor spend

South East England Studies of economic aspects, service assets and heritage/tourism

14.14 *The following sections are in-depth surveys of the assets of 165 small towns in South East England. They look at the economic assets; service assets and heritage assets. The surveys were carried out by ECOVAST between 2009 and 2012. The methodology used is the same in each study and could be replicated by countries or regions who wanted to look at the assets of their own towns.*

14.15 *It is believed that small towns in SE England are typical of all the small towns in England and those across Europe. It is accepted that this region is one of the more densely populated regions of Europe but it has significant rural areas with a variety of nationally designated landscapes and some 1,400 village settlements as well as 165 small towns. They share a common history and heritage with small towns across England and are also similar to small towns across Europe serving the needs of themselves and their hinterlands across the ages, These 165 towns are nearly all historic and having grown up since medieval times and remain compact reflecting architecture and history throughout the ages, not overwhelmed by modern development (because of strict English planning policies). Many have Town Charters issued in medieval times. They are typical of all small towns whatever political regimes that have developed in west and east Europe since the 2nd World War.*

15: Economic Study of Small Towns and their value to the economy

15.1 Purpose of this study

The purpose was to look at the value of these 165 small towns to the local economy. It examines the functions of each town and ranks them giving a typology for these towns in terms of population size, ranking position, communications and remoteness from major urban and medium sized towns. It also provides evidence that could be used to influence future policy.

15.2 Methodology

A survey of economic assets was carried out on all 165 towns and then ranked into Upper, Middle and Lower Towns with the Upper Ranking divided into two with the very best towns ranked as 'Top Towns'.

15.3 The Survey

The towns had to have a hinterland and be freestanding - not totally surrounded by urban populations of larger towns. The towns should have a population below 20,000 but there was no lower limit. Several functional criteria were identified for survey which included retail businesses (magnet traders; members of the 5 major supermarket chains; members of other supermarket chains; range of shops; weekly market and farmers markets); the number of other businesses; the town being an administrative centre for the district in which they were situated.

15.4 Accessibility to and from towns is important to their attractiveness to a hinterland or visitors. The survey included access to railway stations and motorway junctions.

15.5 Each town was looked at in relation to its position within the hinterland of larger sized towns.

15.6 The Results

(i) The 165 'towns' had a combined approximate population of 1,261,600 (15.8% of population of the region) with:

- 26.7% of the towns are above 10,000 population;
- 38.2% of the towns are between 5,000 and 9,999 population and
- 35.1% of the towns below a population of 5,000.

(ii) The retail assets were significant with 93 magnet traders (though 30 of these have subsequently been lost in the recession with the closure of Woolworths); 99 major supermarkets; 114 other supermarkets; 34 had weekly markets and 59 had farmers markets; and 47 towns had a very good range of shops.

(iii) In terms of employment there were 12,401 businesses in small towns. Whilst this does not give the size of these businesses they are significant assets to the local and regional economy.

(iv) There used to be 38 small towns which were administrative centres with local council offices but many were lost to Local Government reorganisation in the mid-1970s and only 10 are left today – an example of centralisation.

(v) There were 50.9% towns that had a secondary school - a highly valuable asset to their hinterlands as well as providing a significant number of jobs.

(vi) In terms of communications 50.9% have a railway station; 23.0% lie within 5 miles of a motorway junction and 17.0% lie over 5 miles but less than 10 miles from a motorway junction

(vii) The economic ranking of the towns resulted in 9 Top Towns; 22 Upper Towns; 53 Middle Towns and 81 Lower Towns.

(viii) All but 1 of the 9 Top Towns have a population of more than 10,000 and all but 3 of the 20 Upper Towns have a population of more than 10,000. All but one of the top 12 retail towns have a population of over 10,000 and all the top 11 employment towns have a population of over 10,000.

15.7 Conclusions of the economic study

(i) There were significant economic assets in these small towns, with 12,410 businesses which are major contributors to the local, regional and even national economies and 399 retail businesses serving the towns and their hinterlands and 84 secondary schools which serve the towns and many hundreds of villages that surround them.

(ii) The towns with the best functions are ones where nearly all have a population above 10,000; with 88.9% top ranked towns having a population above 10,000; 85.7% upper ranked towns having a population above 10,000; 22.6% middle ranking towns have a population over 10,000 but only 3.6% lower ranking towns have a population over 10,000. More than half of the lower ranking towns have a population below 5,000.

(iii) The towns in the top two rankings demonstrate more sustainability criteria by providing a good range of convenience shopping and local employment for both themselves and their immediate hinterland of villages and hamlets where travel journeys are quite short.

(iv) There are a considerable number of towns that are over 10 miles (or 16 kilometres) away from the centre of major or medium sized urban towns and more remote from their urban dominance. These more remote towns – particularly the two rankings which have a good or very good range of services are vital to the well-being of their hinterland of surrounding villages and countryside. These towns should be supported by policies which will maintain their important role as rural service centres and enable them to remain more sustainable rural settlements.

16 Study of Service Assets 2012

16.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose was to provide additional evidence on these same 165 small towns on service assets and to discuss the potential opportunities and threats to community services.

16.2 People need a range of essential services to provide for their daily needs. One definition for a 'sustainable settlement' is one which is able to provide for most of its basic daily requirements without the need to travel long distances.

16.3 Methodology

This study used some of the data collected for the Economic Study but also added information from several new data sets, both national and local. The number of services present in a town has been used to rank the towns into Top; Upper; Middle and Lower Ranked Towns.

16.4 The Survey

This study looks at 10 different community services for each of the 165 towns. They included acting as an administrative centre; providing Education (primary and/or secondary school); a Post Office; Chemists; Medical Care (Doctors Surgery and/or Hospital); Banks; Libraries; Leisure centres; Ambulance Stations and Fire Stations. Eight of these services selected are needed for daily living and 2 others – libraries and leisure are ones which provide knowledge and healthy enjoyment.

16.5 The Results

For the ten different Services that have been looked at:

- Only 5% of the small towns are now administrative centres providing access to local authority services such as housing, planning, refuse collection, car parking etc. Prior to 1974 23% had been administrative centres.
- Every small town has a primary school. However secondary schools are only provided the larger small towns or in large towns and not in villages. 51% of the towns had a secondary school – an asset serving wide hinterlands of villages and hamlets and which is an important service centre role.
- Every small town has a Post Office, providing essential services which are highly valued, although their future is not secure.
- Every town has access to a chemists shop. Some feel threatened by local doctors' practices which also provide prescription services.
- Every small town does have a doctors' surgery. Some of the towns also have a local hospital which can provide a variety of local services which can include convalescent and respite care and out-patients services such as physiotherapy. None are Accident and Emergency or trauma centres which are concentrated in major hospitals in the larger towns.
- 82% of towns have access to money through one of the major banks or building societies
- 92% still have a library, although their future is not secure because of pressure on local authority budgets.
- Only 46% of towns have leisure or sports centres.
- Ambulance Stations offer a variety of services but are only found in 19% of towns.
- Retained Fire Stations – that is stations which are not permanently manned but employ part time fire-crews who have to live nearby – have been found in 67% of towns.

16.6 In terms of rankings there were 10% which were ranked as **Top** Towns for services; 42% which ranked as **Upper** Towns; 37% ranked as **Middle** Towns and 11% which ranked as **Lower** Towns. In the Top ranked towns some had a perfect score. None of the towns had a very poor level of community services.

16.7 Conclusions of the Services Study

(i) It is clear from this research that the small towns in the Study have a good range of community services. The top and upper towns have an excellent level of community services. The middle ranked had reasonable community services. Even the lower ranked towns had a number of community services.

(ii) However, although this picture looks rosy, there remains the threat of losing some of these services through declining local authority budgets where difficult decisions are needed to balance budgets when faced with major budget cuts. Six of the 10 services looked at are dependent upon public sector funding.

(iii) There also remains the threat of further centralisation and the trends towards bigger and better centres.

(v) If small towns are to remain or become more sustainable then the level of community services provided at local level is a critical factor.

17: Study of Heritage assets & their value to rural tourism

17.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to look at the value of these same 165 small towns to tourism, concentrating on heritage tourism rather than any other specialised interests such as golf, wildlife / bird watching or fishing: and to examine their individual heritage assets and discuss how heritage tourism could be of value to the local economy and also provide evidence that could be used to influence future policies on tourism. This study has not looked at car parking (good or bad), quality of street surfaces and signage or the presence or quality of public toilets. It is accepted that all these are essential for tourism and may need new investment to be effective. This study is concentrating on the inherent assets that might attract a tourist interested in history and architecture.

17.2 Potential of Small Towns for Rural Heritage Tourism

Small rural towns serve not only themselves but a hinterland of villages, hamlets and countryside. As shown above they have economic assets creating wealth for the local, regional and even national economies. They are centres for services and often the hub of public transport. These towns include many assets which attract visitors – castles, keeps, country mansions, attractive streets and squares and places to eat and places to stay. The landscape setting is important in small towns as it is clearly visible – much more so than in larger urban populations – and adds to the attractiveness of the town.

17.3 This study focuses on ‘heritage tourism’ and the historic appeal and quality buildings which directly reflect the local building materials of stone, wood and bricks and tiles made from local clays and architectural styles of buildings denoting different periods of history. Small towns also offer a much wider range of attractions than this – they provide shops and markets as well as places to eat and stay.

17.4 Methodology

This study looked a number of data sets, both national and local, for all 165 small towns and then assessed their heritage assets, and ranked them according to these assets into Top; Upper; Middle; Lower Ranked Towns and finally those that had no or negligible heritage assets.

17.5 The Survey

The research survey looked at 5 specific criteria of built heritage and also their landscape setting. These historic building and landscape assets have been added together to form a ‘heritage asset score’ and used by the ranking exercise.

(i) The Historic Built Assets

- The rights of self-administration by a Mayor and town council with the status of borough date back in some places in Anglo Saxon times to the 10th century. Also in the Middle-Ages (from around 1100 onwards) Town Charters were awarded allowing markets and fairs to be held in the town where they were centres of a hinterland in historic times. In Germany and elsewhere in the 13th and 14th centuries the right to hold a market was extended to include the right of self-government, administration and justice with their own courts, Sheriffs, Mayors and councils and officials. This study used the presence of a ‘Town Charter’.
- Since 1967 Conservation Areas have been designated by Local Planning Authorities which identify significant groups of historic and architectural buildings, natural features and assets of cultural heritage
- Many thousands of old buildings of architectural or historic interest (BAHI or ‘Listed Buildings’) exist across the United Kingdom. They are on Statutory Lists to denote their importance to heritage which must be taken into account when affected by development proposals.
- The Council for British Archaeology (CBA) also in 1967 produced a list of the best 324 historic towns in the United Kingdom and a very best list of the top 51 of the 324. Whilst the list is rather old it and did not cover all 165 towns it was the first comprehensive analysis of the historic assets of towns and cities.
- Single buildings of national interest owned by either the National Trust or English Heritage – the two bodies responsible for the upkeep of the very best buildings in England, Scotland and Wales. The National Trust is private sector and English Heritage public sector.

(ii) Landscape Setting Asset

Whilst this heritage study is primarily concerned with buildings, in small towns the landscape is very much part of the ambience. In the area surveyed there are 2 National Parks and 9 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Also many small towns have a river frontage considered a quality townscape feature, some have a canal and some towns are on the coast.

17.6 Accommodation

Other studies have looked at how much visitors spend when they become tourists. Those who stay overnight spend at least twice as much as those who are just on a day trip. Although not a mainstay of this research a brief look has been taken of hotel provision in the 165 small rural towns, listing all hotels that are 3 star or above – considered to be quality hotels. They are a significant asset for historic towns and those that have them already have an advantage over those who have none.

17.7 The Results

It is clear that there is a great deal of ‘heritage’ existing in these small towns:

- 100% of the Top and Upper ranked heritage towns; 98.2% of Middle ranked heritage towns and even 4.8% of Lower ranked heritage towns had an historic town Charter

- 100% of the Top and Upper ranked Heritage towns; 96.4% of the Middle ranked heritage towns and even 94.5% of the Lower ranked heritage towns had a Conservation Area
- 10.9% of the towns were regarded by the CBA as part of the most historic towns in England and 1.8% of them merited inclusion in the 'very best' list.

17.8 In terms of rankings:

- 9.1% of the towns had exceptionally good heritage assets and were Top ranked;
- 16.4% had really good heritage assets and were ranked as Upper heritage towns – giving more than a quarter of towns being potentially significant heritage tourist destinations and very well suited to attract tourists.
- A further 30% are Middle ranked heritage towns with good heritage assets – which also have the potential for rural tourism.

17.9 The 20.6% of Lower ranked heritage towns do have some heritage assets but not enough to attract visitors compared to the higher ranked towns. The word 'lower' does not denote poor quality heritage, just less of it compared to others. 23.6% of towns had negligible or no heritage assets

17.10 In terms of ease of access to 'heritage towns' by both rail and motorway there are a significant number that do not have good communications - 26% of Top or Upper Ranked heritage towns; 42% of Middle ranked heritage towns; and 21% of Lower ranked heritage towns have poorer communications. These towns may find it harder to attract visitors compared to the towns with good communications.

17.11 All the Top ranked and 95% of the Upper ranked heritage towns had a quality hotel.

17.12 Conclusions of Heritage Study

(i) It is clear from this research that 77% of the small towns in South East England can lay claim to an historic heritage with 56% having a good or very good quality of heritage. They still maintain a distinctiveness which reflects local building materials and architectural styles from different periods of history.

(ii) If similar percentages were applied to the whole of Europe it would equate to 1,787 (56%) of them having a good or very good quality of heritage, even though the data sets available would be different to those in the United Kingdom. This gives clear support to the argument that small towns could be centres of rural heritage tourism. Many of them already will be performing this role but many others could follow their example. They provide good places to visit and become local or regional centres of rural tourism based on their attractiveness.

(iii) The research results could be used as the basis for campaigns to attract visitors who are interested in looking at towns which have good historic and architectural buildings, and set in quality landscapes. Some also have famous buildings which have a world wide appeal.

(iv) It is also considered that small towns have managed to retain their distinctiveness reflecting their history and architectural styles from across the ages and escape from the worst of the ravages caused by modern retail development, avoiding large plate glass shop frontages and large fascia boards (which has happened in so many of the larger towns, particularly in the United Kingdom).

(v) These small rural towns are the backbone of rural areas, serving a hinterland of villages, hamlets and countryside. Heritage tourism in these small towns can also advertise other local attractions in the surrounding rural areas.

(vi) It is considered that analysis of heritage in the small towns in South East England is typical of what could be found in the small historic towns in the rest of Europe. They share a similar history - have undergone growth, had periods of stagnation, suffered wars and conflicts, been affected by the industrial revolution and modern development pressures, and the centralisation of services and loss of earlier historic importance.

(vii) Tourism businesses can thrive in small towns and can make a significant contribution to local economies. All these small towns have a lot to offer the tourist who is interested in history and heritage buildings. Surveys of what visitors spend indicate that a staying visitor spends twice that of a day tripper.

(viii) Heritage tourism assets including those in rural areas will attract people from across the region they are situated in but from major cities nearby and some iconic tourism attractions will have world-wide appeal.

(ix) Concentration of heritage tourism in rural areas – advertising their unique and distinctive buildings, history and architecture might encourage new hotel and other businesses. Most of the hotels in small towns will be small and not necessarily part of any hotel chain and able to develop their own individual styles and welcome. Quality hotels are critical for staying visitors. Quality eating places of different types are also critical – restaurants, pubs, bistros, tea shops.

(x) As they are hubs of public transport they could also promote sustainable ways of accessing them – 50% of them still have a railway station.

(xi) Visitors also require good car parks, easy signposting, good quality pavements but these difficult times of public spending means that it will be difficult to improve existing facilities.

(xii) It must be recognised that tourists need to be welcomed to the places they visit. The introduction has already identified that some town residents do not want tourist at all and a proper strategy for how the town will cope with them will be needed.

(xiii) However it is recognised that not everyone living in small towns like tourists or want to encourage them. They resent the problems caused by visitor traffic clogging their streets, not knowing where they want to go; or competing for local car parking spaces. Some people also worry that visitors will be encouraged to buy houses in the area for second homes and so push the prices up and prevent local people from buying in their own town.

(xiv) Whatever future strategies and actions are envisaged, it will always be important to engage all sections of civil society in the vision and implementation of measures to conserve and enhance the assets of small towns.

18: Conclusions of the evidence base

18.1 The European Study proved how many thousands of small towns there are across Europe and how many million people live in them – bigger than any European Country except Germany . If they co-operated more with each other they could develop a really strong voice and they could use this to influence policy and programme makers of the future.

18.2 The Opinion surveys identified that they have very many similar concerns and all have suffered from the economic recession.

18.3 The South East England towns' studies demonstrated what economic assets they had, what kind of service assets and the heritage assets which could provide a new future for many of them to be centres for tourism. These types of survey could be replicated across most countries even though the data sets will vary.

Full details of the above studies on Economic, Service and Heritage Assets with diagrams and Tables will be found on the ECOVAST website – ASSET pages referred to on the Contents Page

Sources:

The European Survey on town populations used primarily the website and database on Taseo.com, but was supported by additional information from the ECOVAST German Section; The former UK Countryside Agency; Michelin Red Guides and various maps which give population of towns. The figures are for the population of the town, not the whole municipality or district in which it lies.

The Opinion Surveys were carried out by ECOVAST.

The survey of towns in SE England are the results of actual surveys carried out by ECOVAST, but included a database of businesses from the former South East England Development Agency, and Yellow Pages Business Pages and various internet sites of local authorities.

The photographs used in Section 7 (apart from paragraph 7.3.2 and 7.9.2) of the main report are taken from Wikipedia individual town websites.

Acknowledgements

Report author, researcher and analyst:

Valerie Carter, President ECOVAST International Committee.

Contributors to research:

Arthur Spiegler, ECOVAST Austria, on historic towns and landscape.

Gerhard Fasching and Sylvia Mayer of ECOVAST Austria on Austrian historic towns.

Pam Moore, ECOVAST UK, for undertaking the ASSET opinion surveys.

Phil Turner, convenor of the ASSET Project.