Visions of St Andrews: An Action Research Project

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Motivations

- Explore academic concepts of community, visioning and universities' roles and responsibilities.
- Develop a conceptual understanding of the St Andrews "community".
- Develop skills in undertaking qualitative research in a supervised setting.
- Do action research: Research that has a practical positive application to empower both the participants and the researcher.
- Identify how Transition: University of St Andrews can more effectively initiate practical sustainability action in collaboration with the wider community.

Aims

- ➤ Explore perceptions of the St Andrews **community**.
- ➤ Identify **visions** of the future for the community of St Andrews.
- ➤ Determine how the **University** is perceived to influence and relate to the community of St Andrews.

Method

- Initial literature review around visioning theory & practice, concepts of community and notions of the sustainable university.
- Semi-structured interviews with key community members exploring the three aims. Additional interviews were conducted with other interested community members as well as Transition: University of St Andrews members of staff. 15 interviews were conducted in total.
- Interviews were coded mainly inductively while using the aims as overall guides. Codes were then built into theories in diagrammatic form using emergent categorisations.
- These initial results were presented to all participants to confirm their accuracy. This feedback session was also an opportunity to run a focus group to elicit common visions and have a facilitated group discussion.

Results

Who is St Andrews?

Community Mapping:
- Two dimensions emerged from the interviews: length of stay in St Andrews and distance from the centre of town.
- Figure 1 illustrates the high transience of the population with large numbers of people making only brief visits to the town (golfers, tourists) and many others having a fixed term to their stay (students, post-docs). Even businesses and their staff were perceived to be partially transient. Retirees and well-established families were perceived to be the least transient.
- Figure 2 shows how groups vary in their proximity to the centre of town, i.e. North, South and Market Street. The geographical separation by wealth, age group and occupation led many interviewees to describe the St Andrews community as fragmented or dislocated.

Power and Voice:
- The whole community of St Andrews was described as being at the mercy of the large inflows and outflows of money which circulate through St Andrews (Figure 3). However, participants attributed power in the community to those groups which control, shape and benefit from these large financial throughputs.
- Figure 4 shows how local decision-making was perceived to be made in debates between three main groups with frequent accusations of misrepresentation and disregard for the interests of the rest of the town. Those groups which were seen to be under-represented include younger working adults and families with less time and energy to make their voice heard.

What should the future of St Andrews be?

Implied Visions:
- Participants often expressed visions for the future in implicit ways.
- Some statements identified present positive qualities of St Andrews and thus expressed a desire for these to be retained in the future (Figure 5).
- Oral histories of St Andrews (Figure 6) were narratives that recurred across different interviews and although they relate to past events, they have implicit consequences for the future.

Explicit Visions:
- When asked to comment explicitly on the future, participants often identified specific issues (Figure 7) on which they had strong views about appropriate solutions in the immediate future.
- When participants did express long-term visions, these were remarkably similar and expressed a desire for a self-sufficient, diversified, reinvigorated and more communicative community.

How does and should the University influence and engage with the wider community?

Impact:
- Not only is the University one of the longest-standing institutions in the town but it also attracts students, academics and support staff who form a large part of the community's transient population (Figure 1).
- It occupies the centre of town but also attracts people from the rest of Fife, Scotland and the world (Figure 2).
- The University directly and indirectly controls a large part of the economic flows in the town (Figure 3).
- It is clearly perceived as one of the most powerful actors in the town (Figure 4) and has a strong impact on almost all issues in the town (e.g. Figure 7).

Engagement:
- The feedback workshop revealed that participants generally distrust the university to act for the common good of the wider community.
- Several participants highlighted the lack of formal town-gown communication channels.
- This mistrust and lack of communication with the University seem to be exacerbating current tensions around the future of the Botanic Gardens, concern for which was shared amongst all participants.
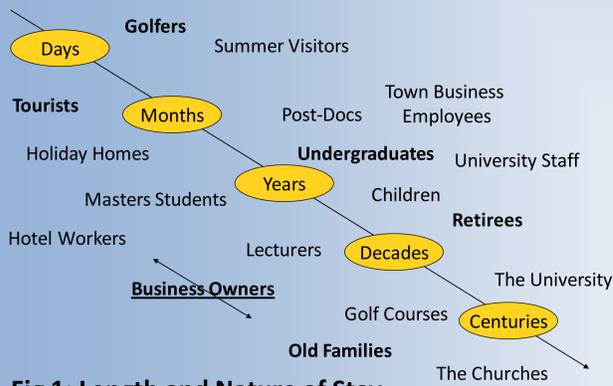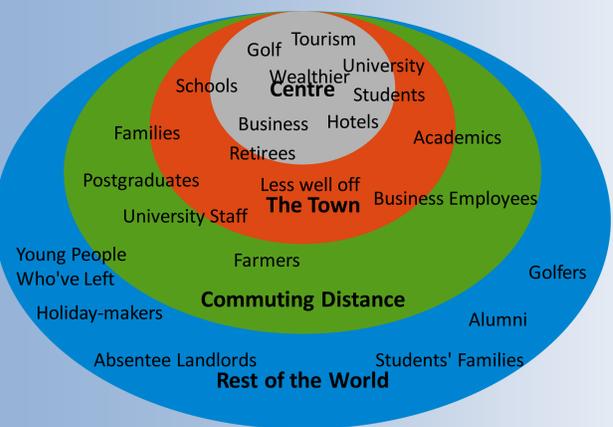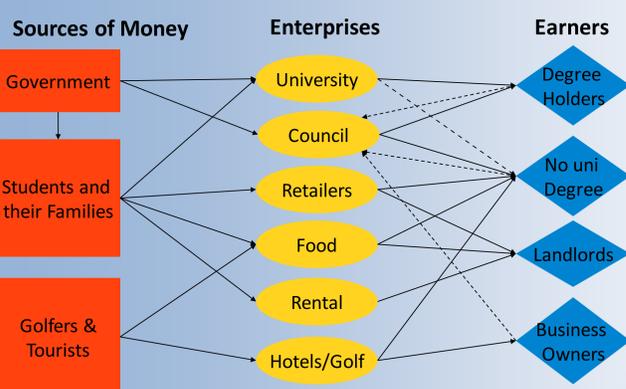
Fig 1: Length and Nature of Stay

Days — Golfers — Summer Visitors
Tourists — Months — Post-Docs — Town Business Employees
Holiday Homes — Undergraduates — University Staff
Masters Students — Years — Children
Hotel Workers — Lecturers — Retirees
Decades — The University
Business Owners — Golf Courses — Centuries
Old Families — The Churches

Fig 2: Distance from the Centre

Centre: Golf, Tourism, University, Wealthier, Students, Schools, Business, Hotels
The Town: Families, Retirees, Academics, Postgraduates, Less well off, Business Employees, University Staff, Farmers
Commuting Distance: Young People Who've Left, Holiday-makers, Golfers, Alumni
Rest of the World: Absentee Landlords, Students' Families

Fig 3: Economic Power & Livelihoods

Sources of Money: Government; Students and their Families; Golfers & Tourists
Enterprises: University, Council, Retailers, Food, Rental, Hotels/Golf
Earners: Degree Holders, No uni Degree, Landlords, Business Owners
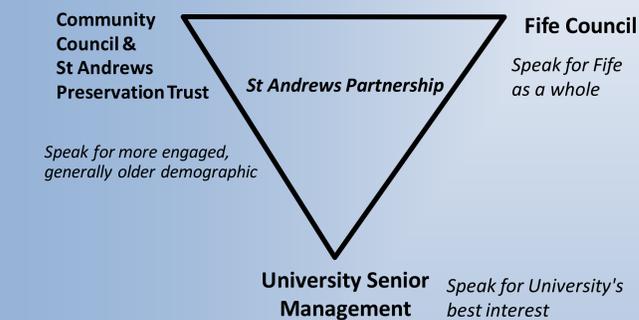
Fig 4: Vocality and Political Power

St Andrews Partnership
Community Council & St Andrews Preservation Trust — Speak for more engaged, generally older demographic
Fife Council — Speak for Fife as a whole
University Senior Management — Speak for University's best interest

"Safe", "Small"
"Great place to bring up a family"
"By the sea", "Everything you need"
"International", "Dynamic", "Historic",
"Cultured", "Affluent, Motivated, Educated"
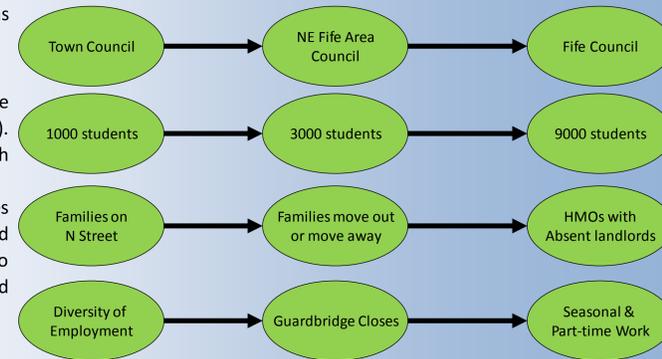### "Unique"

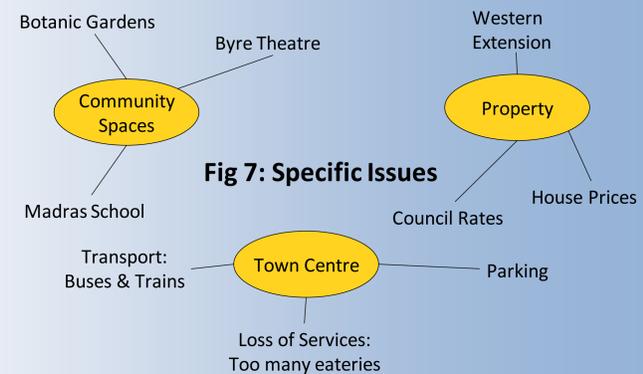**Fig 5: People like St Andrews:**

Fig 6: Oral Histories of St Andrews

Town Council → NE Fife Area Council → Fife Council
1000 students → 3000 students → 9000 students
Families on N Street → Families move out or move away → HMOs with Absent landlords
Diversity of Employment → Guardbridge Closes → Seasonal & Part-time Work

Fig 7: Specific Issues

Botanic Gardens, Byre Theatre, Western Extension, Community Spaces, Property, Madras School, House Prices, Council Rates, Transport: Buses & Trains, Town Centre, Parking, Loss of Services: Too many eateries

Fig 8: Hopes and Aspirations

Self-sufficiency
"Small communities need to look after themselves"
"It's such a special place that has everything you need."
"Kids to be educated, waste to be dealt with, energy to be generated."

Outskirts
"I would want to create a community feel in the areas of town where most people live."
"We should have some really nice places where kids can play on straw bales or whatever and people can communicate. That's where we need a community garden."

Economic Diversification
"One thing I'd like to see is local businesses."
"...encourage smaller businesses"
"...that could give people jobs in the area. It would be really nice to have something that could take a lot of people through as apprentices."

Harmony
"It could be more integrated. [...] Places where we meet."
"if people could get together and do something about it, it could be wonderful"
"The feeling that the university and the town both positively value and recognise the interdependence explicitly and actively and positively"

Discussion

- The conceptual understanding of the St Andrews community developed through this research project is necessarily partial as it cannot hope to encompass all the participants' descriptions. This diversity of perspectives parallels academia where understandings of community are "essentially contested" (Somerville 2011).
- Explicit visioning is often used as a tool for sustainability action (e.g. Vergragt & Quist 2011; Robinson 2003) but participants in this project expressed visions in many different ways, often implicitly. Acknowledging these 'non-conventional' visions is important to inform appropriate action.
- Academic debate on universities' roles and responsibilities is ongoing (Collini 2012), particularly in regards to sustainability (Sterling, Maxey & Luna 2013). This research contributes a location-specific assessment of the University of St Andrews' role as a powerful local agent in land use, housing and employment.

Conclusions

- ➤ The **University** of St Andrews is an integral component of all descriptions of the **community**. It has a large influence on all **visions** for the future of the town.
- ➤ Acknowledging this impact is important. Creating multiple avenues for dialogue at formal and informal levels would help build trust and goodwill.
- ➤ An issue of specific current concern – the future of the Botanic Garden - is both an effect and a cause of mistrust but could be an avenue for positive engagement.

References

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Somerville, P. 2011. Understanding Community: Politics, policy and practice. Bristol: Policy Press.
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transition
university of st andrews

University of St Andrews