

# Identifying social innovations in industrial towns: a comparative perspective

Bright Future  
D3.4 Synthesis Report

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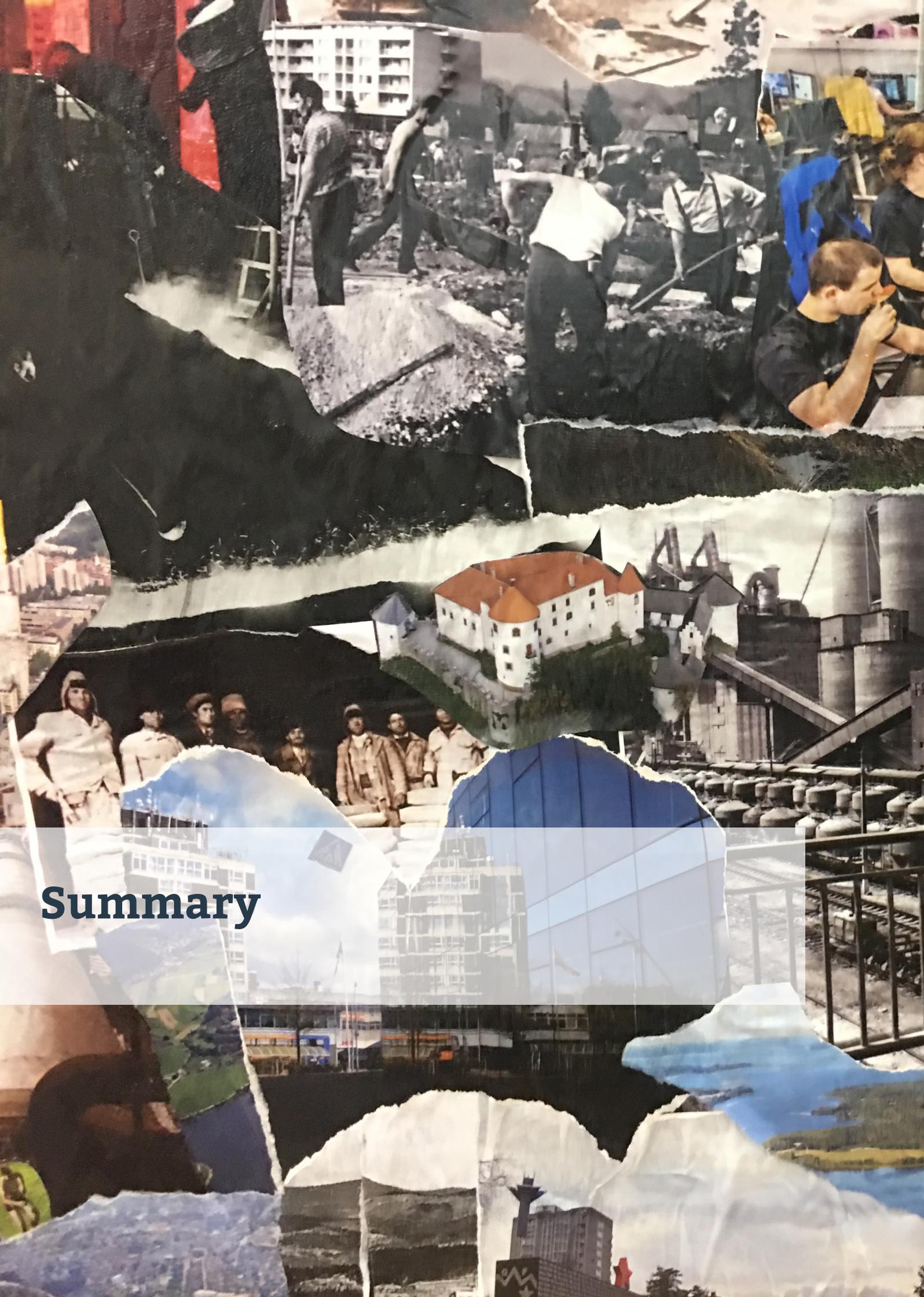
## About the project

This report was authored by Social Life as part of Bright Future, a European research project in association with JPI Urban Europe. Bright Future is working with people in small and medium-sized industrial towns in Europe to explore their socio-economic characteristics, qualities and underlying resilience. This report is a deliverable of Work Package IV, which has been exploring how locally-driven social innovation can help respond to the needs of industrial towns across the continent.

**Social Life** was established by the Young Foundation in 2012 as an independent centre of expertise on placemaking. Our work is concerned with the social life of communities and what can be done to create resilient and sustainable communities that help residents feel settled, content and supported in their environment. We are based in London and work in the UK and internationally.

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# Summary

# Summary

There is growing interest in the experiences of small and medium-sized industrial towns (SMITs) across Europe, which in recent years have increasingly been cast as sites of economic and social discontent. Yet so far little work has been done to understand how social innovation can support the citizens of industrial towns and their broader development.

This report documents a participatory process undertaken to generate context-specific social innovations in five industrial towns in Europe. It did so by using an assessment of the social sustainability of each case study town, alongside a review of their histories of social innovation, as prompts for developing new responses to local challenges. The process was centred on a series of three participatory workshops held in each location.

## **Social sustainability in industrial towns**

- Conducting an assessment of local strengths and vulnerabilities in each town using a social sustainability framework pointed to some common features, such as the strength of local networks which were at times linked to the legacy of industrial culture and traditions of social solidarity.
- Smallness emerges as both a strength and weakness, contributing positively to quality of life among some residents, while also being associated with traits perceived as negative - such as insularity or backwardness.
- Concerns around de-population, shrinkage and the struggle to fulfil the aspirations of young people were also broadly shared, while the negative reputations endured by some of the towns were felt to hamper efforts at renewal.
- The assessment also pointed to tensions between the different goals of sustainable development, in particular how economic forms which are considered more resilient, such as diversified local employers, may also be socially detrimental, raising questions for local policymakers around which objectives to prioritise in their development strategies.

## **Local histories of social innovation**

- The review of the history of social innovation demonstrates the wide range of creative responses to challenges undertaken in SMITs, many of which have been citizen driven.
- Many of the innovations documented were inspired from elsewhere and highlighted the connections of towns to wider systems of innovation and action.
- Driving forward these new approaches were often the determined efforts of individuals often alongside the support of local authorities. While citizen-led action was felt to be growing in a number of towns,

the role of businesses in creating and supporting social innovation was generally felt to have declined.

- The review highlighted some tensions in the discourse of innovation, where effective models were not sustained in spite of being shown to be effective, pointing to a risk in institutional support favouring novelty over proven approaches.
- The role of social innovation in attracting positive interest in the towns was also revealed by the review, with certain emblematic projects often used by residents to counter negative portrayals of the town.

### **Developing new social innovation ideas**

- Participants in the final workshops developed a range of imaginative solutions that responded to the priority challenges in the towns. Several ideas drew inspiration from existing models, while a few could be considered wholesale new approaches.
- Some projects were framed as restorative, attempting to bring back something which has been lost locally, underlining the importance for residents of conserving existing structures seen to be of social value.
- Several ideas also challenged notions of social innovation which stress its distinction from market-based approaches, offering new business ideas to address the economic issues perceived as key needs in the town. These also highlight the potential relevance of responsible business models to SMITs undergoing transition.
- The wide scope of the ideas generated also indicated the desire and imaginative capacity of citizens to shape larger scale projects and strategies, not just grassroots actions. Embedding processes to allow for meaningful citizen input could help harness this creativity.





# Introduction and methods

## 1. Introduction

This report presents a comparative analysis of the results of Work Package IV (WP IV) of the Bright Future project. Bright Future posits that dominant post-industrial discourses, which emphasise the growing importance of the knowledge economy or tertiary sector (e.g. Mellander 2012), are primarily suited to larger urban contexts and neglect and marginalise the assets and qualities of small and medium sized industrial towns (SMITs). Analysis undertaken at an earlier stage of the project highlighted that SMITs are a vital part of Europe's urban and economic systems, however they are often overlooked in economic planning (Hoekstra 2017). Bright Future aims to develop place-specific urban strategies for SMITs in Europe by respecting their strengths, needs and expectations.

The focus of WP IV was to identify social innovations in the project's five case study towns: Corby (United Kingdom), Fieni (Romania), Heerlen (Netherlands), Kajaani (Finland), and Velenje (Slovenia). Social Life, one of the UK partners, developed the WP IV methodology. This focused on a participatory action research process carried out in each town, with the objective of generating ideas for context-specific social innovations. The process was grounded in the needs and assets of each locality, building on the findings of Work Package III (WP III), which explored the dominant and alternative narratives through which residents perceive and experience their towns.

In the following section we set out the theoretical underpinnings and practitioner experience which have informed the WP IV research process. We discuss the concept of 'social sustainability' used to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the case study towns. We then explore definitions of social innovation and the sparse literature on social innovation in towns, before setting out the methodology for the work package. The following chapters present a comparative analysis of the findings for each of the three stages of WP IV carried out in each town:

1. Social sustainability assessments
2. Reviews of local histories of social innovation
3. Development of new ideas for social innovation

The report also offers reflections on the methodology for the participatory action research undertaken and its suitability for supporting social innovation in SMITs. The report concludes with reflections on the common challenges and assets facing SMITs in Europe and how they have used, or may continue to implement, social innovations which support their residents to adapt and thrive in the context of changed economic landscapes.

### 1.1 Defining social sustainability

Social sustainability, alongside economic and environmental sustainability, is one of the three pillars of sustainable development identified in the 1987 Brundtland Commission to the United Nations. It is widely recognised that the social dimensions of sustainable development have been overlooked in policy and practice and there is a growing interest in rebalancing the sustainable development agenda to take account of social as well as environmental and economic needs (Boström 2012).

Broadly, work on social sustainability encompasses a range of concepts relating to social wellbeing, social equity, social capital, and social cohesion (e.g. Dempsey et al 2011, Cuthill 2009). As Boström (2012) highlights, these are the "substantive aspects" of what social sustainability sets out to achieve. In much work on social sustainability these are also underpinned by "procedural aspects", such as social infrastructure, citizen participation and democratic governance - or *how* it seeks to achieve these aims.

Work on social sustainability often highlights its contestedness, opacity and lack of fixed qualities or characteristics (Boström 2012, Dempsey 2011, Shirazi & Keivani 2017). Over the past decade a body of academic and practitioner-led research has emerged that has attempted to define and conceptualise social sustainability and to map out its key characteristics and principles (e.g. Woodcraft 2012, Dempsey et al. 2011). Housing and urban regeneration are strong themes within this work, as is the idea that the

neighbourhood or local community is an appropriate scale for measurement (Dempsey et al 2011). This work acknowledges that the practical and operational aspects of social sustainability are not well explored, clearly defined or well integrated into the policy and practice of urban planning.

In 2012, the work package leader, Social Life, proposed a definition and framework for social sustainability in relation to places. This emerged as part of a commission from the UK Homes and Communities Agency (the UK Government’s arms-length housing delivery body, now called Homes England), which aimed to synthesise academic and practice-based research about what makes new housing developments thrive (Woodcraft et al. 2012). The definition, used within Bright Future, seeks to capture what it takes to create places which support their residents’ wellbeing:

*“A process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work. Social sustainability combines design of the physical realm with design of the social world - infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement and space for people and places to evolve.” (Woodcraft et al. 2012)*

This definition sits alongside a framework for capturing the different elements needed to create socially sustainable places. The framework is organised into four dimensions: amenities and social infrastructure; social and cultural life; voice and influence; and adaptability and resilience. These include “hard” factors such as access to local services and well-designed public spaces, alongside “soft” factors such as local identity, residents’ sense of belonging, feelings of safety and community relationships. The framework offers a tool through which the social sustainability of places can be measured and assessed, as well as providing a lens through which practical actions to improve social sustainability can be undertaken.

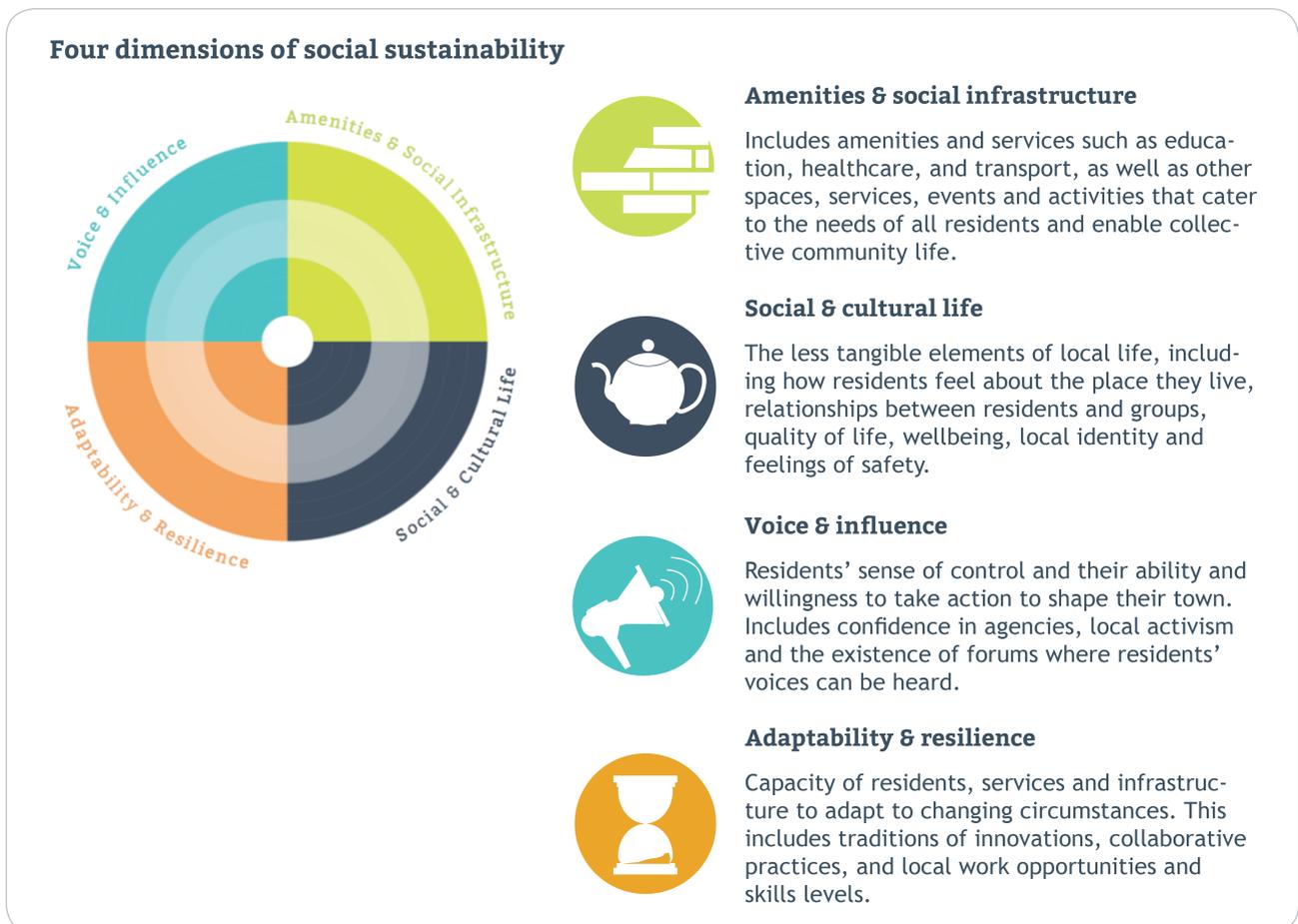


Figure 1: Social Life’s four dimensions of social sustainability

## 1.2 Social innovation: definitions and trends

Social innovation has gained significant attention over the past two decades, with the majority of the work on the field emerging in the late 2000s. Bridgstock et al (2011) argue that the idea gained currency in an attempt and challenge to the field of ‘innovation’ to move away from the idea of innovation for purely economic reasons and recognise that people could innovate for societal benefit. Yet it is not a new field of practice, rather it is widely understood to encompass many social actions or societal changes which precede the popularisation of the term, such as the cooperative movement or the welfare state.

Broadly, social innovations are conceived as new approaches which promote the social good. Beyond this, many definitions stress the complexity of social innovation and the centrality of cooperation and the relationship between different actors (BEPA 2011:33, Stanford). Work on social innovation has emphasised the importance of the process as well as the outcomes of social innovation. According to a definition proposed by NESTA and the Young Foundation, and subsequently been adopted by the Bureau of European Policy Advisors and the European Commission, through creating new relationships and collaborations, social innovations “are not only good for society but also enhance society’s capacity to act” (BEPA 2011).

Social innovation is also understood to be context specific: particular solutions arise out of specific geographic, political, cultural and history context and are therefore not always scalable or replicable. A review of European Union social innovation policy by NESTA, the UK’s dedicated social innovation institution, highlighted the particular salience of context-specific approaches given the regional disparities found across European member states (Reynolds et al. 2017). The importance of territorial approaches have also been emphasised by Van Dyck et al (2013).

A broad range of models and approaches are understood to be encompassed within the field of social innovation, from changes in regulation to new services or products. Hence many social innovations are not recognised as such by individuals taking them forward, they may instead be understood as solutions to particular problems or new ways of acting which promote the social good. The typology below developed by the TEPSIE project highlights this breadth of approaches.

Type of social innovation	Description	Example
New services and products	New interventions or new programmes to meet social needs	Car-sharing; zero energy housing developments (e.g. BedZED)
New practices	New services which require new professional roles or relationships	Dispute resolution between citizens and the state in the Netherlands
New processes	Co-production of new services	Participatory budgeting, which started in Brazil and has since widely scaled; Fair Trade
New rules and regulations	Creation of new laws or new entitlements	Personal budgets e.g. in Denmark and the Netherlands where older people can decide themselves how to spend much of their support money
New organisational forms	Hybrid organisational forms such as social enterprises	Belu Water, a small UK based social enterprise, which sells bottled water and donates all its profits to WaterAid

Figure 2: Typology of social innovation (TEPSIE, 2014)

Where much earlier writing on social innovation emphasised that it was not unique to the not-for-profit sector, having connections with market-led and cross-sector approaches (Mulgan et al. 2007), some newer work responds to concerns that social innovation had become too closely allied with commercial entrepreneurship (e.g. Moulaert et al. 2017). There is still significant debate within the field around the extent to which market-based approaches can be considered social innovations.

Questions also arise with regards to what constitutes an innovation. According to TEPSIE, innovations do not need to be wholesale new ideas or approaches, rather they can be new to the context in which they appear and the actors involved in their implementation (2014: 6). It is also argued that innovation can be incremental, building on existing approaches and models, or disruptive, based on new paradigms or radically different ways of acting, which can provoke systemic changes. According to BEPA, there are three broad categories of social innovation: firstly, grassroots social innovations which respond to social needs not addressed by the market; secondly, innovations which address societal challenges more broadly, blurring the line between the ‘economic’ and the ‘social’; lastly, systemic changes which engender fundamental changes in attitudes, values, policies or strategies, structures or processes (2011: 10). BEPA argue that institutions often play a key role in initiating this final type of innovation.

### **Social innovation patterns across the EU**

Over the past decade, European Union support for social innovation has increased. A number of dedicated funding programmes have provided research and support for the sector. Social innovation has also become institutionalised within policy-making and embedded in requirements for member states to support and facilitate the practice. Yet social innovation as an organised and recognised practice remains uneven across the continent. A 2016 Social Innovation Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit assessed a range of factors which contribute to an environment considered conducive to social innovation, from supportive institutional and policy frameworks, the availability of financing and levels of entrepreneurship, to social factors such as civic engagement, social trust and cultures of volunteerism (Economist Intelligence Unit 2016). Among our project partner countries, the United Kingdom was considered a leader in the field, coming 2<sup>nd</sup> globally in the 2016 Social Innovation Index. The Index ranks the Netherlands second for entrepreneurship, and sixth in the civil society domain, while Finland was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> overall.

Post-socialist eastern European countries are considered to have weaker institutional supports and civil society traditions that enable conscious social innovation. While the field of social responsibility and innovation is clearly present in the Slovenian legislative and strategic framework, supporting organisations and mechanisms for developing social innovation in Slovenia are considered underdeveloped and social innovations are considered in their early stages (Social Innovation Community 2019). In Romania, the fall of communism in the early 90s marked the first emergence of a civil society in the period which followed. Accession to the EU spurred interest in more recent years from public authorities in the “social economy”. However, the country is noted to have relatively new frameworks for social enterprise and little culture of innovation, while there are considered to be underdeveloped relationships between social entrepreneurs and authorities (Cercleux et al. 2019). Other barriers include ICT, limited financial resources and knowledge-based factors.

### **Social innovation in towns**

To date, much research relating to place-based social innovation has focused on cities as the unit of attention, for example a recent Digital Social Innovation Index presents the performance of 60 European cities (NESTA 2019). The city, as a focus for the knowledge economy, is constructed in many accounts as possessing qualities which make it particularly adept at innovation. As Euro Cities argue, “cities are best-placed to build the kind of creative, cross-sectoral and cross-cultural thinking needed for a socially cohesive Europe”.<sup>1</sup> Rural areas are also garnering significant research interest from a social innovation perspective, such as the EU-supported SIMRA project which seeks to find alternative development trajectories for marginalised rural areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Euro Cities. “Social Innovation”. Accessed September 18<sup>th</sup> 2019, <http://www.eurocities.eu/eurocities/issues/social-innovation-issue>

Smaller urban units, such as SMITs, have garnered little explicit interest from the perspective of social innovation research. Yet there growing interest in the future of towns, spurred by arguments that place a focus on towns as sites of economic and political discontent in recent years (Rodriguez-Pose 2018). In spite of this, policy which deals specifically with SMITs is still distinctly lacking, the EPSON TOWN project revealed that none of the ten countries involved in research had an ‘explicit policy’ for small and medium-sized towns (Atkinson 2016:475).

Yet for many towns dependent in the past on a single dominant industry, transition has been central to their recent experiences and shapes how they imagine their futures (Brown et al. 2012). In addition, there is an increasing recognition that traditional development strategies have often failed to address the challenges they face (Rodriguez-Pose 2018). As such, they can be considered fruitful places for new approaches to tackling social needs. So far little work has been done to understand how social innovation can support the citizens of SMITs and their wider development. This report seeks to help address this gap in research and knowledge.

## 2. Methods

The project aimed to explore how place-based social innovation can be enabled within industrial towns. The methodology, developed by UK partners Social Life, draws on the principles of participatory action research. According to Chevalier & Buckles (2013), participatory action research seeks to integrate three aspects: “participation (life in society and democracy), action (engagement with experience and history), and research (soundness in thought and the growth of knowledge)”. Traditions of participatory action research highlight its use as a problem-solving methodology, which aims to produce social change, while pursuing inquiry (Greenwood & Levin 1998).

Alongside these principles, the methodology sought to recreate some of the enabling conditions for successful social innovation. Namely, a grounding in local context, both needs and assets, as well as collaboration between different actors. To achieve this, the methodology was organised into three stages:

1. Social sustainability assessments
2. Reviews of local histories of social innovation
3. Development of new ideas for social innovation

At each stage project teams conducted a participatory workshop, which was supplemented during the first two stages by a review of existing data and further interviews, as detailed below.

The same process was replicated within the five case study SMITs. While participatory research often seeks to involve participants in the research design (Bergold & Thomas 2012), maintaining a prescriptive methodology across the teams was assessed to be worthwhile in order to permit a cross-comparison of the outputs and findings of the process, and enable a broader analysis of the qualities and characteristics relating to social innovation in SMITs.

### Stage 1: Social sustainability assessments

The first stage, the social sustainability assessment, was based on Social Life’s Social Sustainability Framework (Woodcraft et al 2012) which was adapted for this project. The assessment was designed to assess each town’s ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’ in relation to the four dimensions of the framework (see p.5).

An initial assessment was conducted by teams using a review of information gathered through interviews conducted with local residents and stakeholders as part of an earlier phase of the Bright Future project. An analysis was undertaken using a matrix to understand any gaps in information relating to each dimension of social sustainability. Some project teams conducted further research to address these gaps in understanding, including additional interviews, analyses of official data sources on population, education, crime and other socio-demographic statistics available at a municipal level.

A workshop was organised in each case study town, participants were invited through team’s established local networks. Participants worked in groups to share their perspectives on the towns’ strengths and weaknesses in relation to each dimension of the framework. Research teams combined the workshop feedback with the secondary and primary data to compile the final social sustainability assessment. Each social sustainability dimension was scored by researchers using the categories ‘strong’, ‘expected’ and ‘weak’, which were generalized over all the strengths and weaknesses listed. The category ‘polarised’ was introduced to recognise when the dimensions presented both strong positives and strong negatives. The scores are intended to be indicative and point to the relative strengths or weaknesses of the different dimensions.

### Stage 2: Review of local histories of social innovation

During the second phase a participatory review of the history of social innovation in each town was carried out. The objective was to understand the particular characteristics and qualities of previous innovation. A second workshop was organised in each case study town. Participants were asked for examples of local

social innovations and in groups selected cases to explore in more depth. Using worksheets, participants set out the enabling factors, key actors, resources and challenges for the selected innovations. Secondary sources and WPIII interviews were also reviewed for information relevant to the history of social innovation. Some teams also conducted supplementary interviews with individuals involved in social innovations locally.

### Stage 3: Development of new ideas for social innovations

The objective of the final stage was for participants to develop new ideas for social innovations which would respond to needs identified locally. The social sustainability assessments were used as a guide for participants to select the local challenges they wanted to address. A third workshop was organised in each case study town to develop ideas for responses. The workshop involved three steps: problem definition, idea generation, and idea development. Participants worked in groups on each of these exercises. Worksheets and prompt cards were used as tools to stimulate ideas and discussion and enable participants to document their work.

### Participants

Each project team promoted the workshop through networks established during WPIII in their case study towns. The workshops attracted participants from a range of sectors, including local authorities, the civic sector and some business groups. Many participants were already involved in initiatives shaping the town, representing an active section of the local population rather than a more broadly representative sample of residents. A number of teams noted that civil society was strongly represented within the workshops. Two project teams (UK & the Netherlands) also highlighted difficulties attracting ethnic minority groups to the workshops, while in Finland a lack of working-class participants was noted.

	Corby, UK	Fieni, Romania	Heerlen, Netherlands	Kajaani, Finland	Velenje, Slovenia
Workshop 1	23	15	17	17	17
Workshop 2	18	15	15	9	12
Workshop 3	13	16	12	13	12
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>31</b>

Figure 3: Number of workshop participants by case study town.



### **3. Social sustainability assessments**

### 3. Social sustainability assessments

The social sustainability assessment is based on Social Life's 'Social Sustainability Framework' which identifies the necessary elements for creating places that promote citizen wellbeing. In the following section we provide a summary of the results of the assessments, which picks up on common themes as well as the differences between the towns across each of the four dimensions of the framework. A discussion then follows on the themes which emerge through this comparative analysis of the town's assets and needs and how these may point to underlying qualities and characteristics of SMITs.

#### 3.1 Social sustainability assessment: summary results

A number of strengths were shared by the towns within the **amenities and social infrastructure** dimension. The presence or accessibility of green space or nature, community venues and the local arts and cultural scenes were recorded as key strengths within many of the towns. The provision of services was more uneven: education was considered a weakness in two towns, while it was noted to be a strength in three others. A lack of higher education was considered a key issue in Kajaani, with the closure of a teacher training facility felt to have had a detrimental impact on the town more widely. Accessibility of health care was noted as a key issue for two towns, while public transport was considered a weakness in the majority. A lack of an attractive town centre or suitable meeting places were also highlighted in several towns.

**Social and cultural life** was overall one of the strongest social sustainability dimensions. This was attributed to high levels of "community spirit", or social supports, a strong sense of local identity sometimes associated with the town's industrial heritage, as well as feelings of safety in the majority of the towns - Corby and Heerlen stood apart in this regard. A number of assessments also highlighted the quality of life associated with smaller-scale settlements, particularly for families, with the scale of the towns enabling ready access to amenities and promoting a sense of ease in everyday life. Negative factors within this dimension included the poor reputation and stigmatization of several of the towns, as well as poverty and inequality. A lack of tolerance towards newer migrant groups was an issue in Heerlen, Corby and Velenje - all towns with significant migrant populations.

In relation to **voice and influence**, the relationship between the municipal authorities and the population or other groups was regarded as a strength in all the towns, with local authorities broadly considered responsive to residents. This was tempered by distrust of politicians noted in several of the towns. Mechanisms for participation or citizen debate were registered as assets in Velenje, Heerlen and Fieni. Grassroots activity and citizen action, particularly amongst a dedicated group of residents, were also considered strengths in three towns. However, a lack of inclusiveness in political decision-making, passivity, or low participation was identified as a weakness in three towns.

**Adaptability and resilience** was the weakest dimension among the towns overall. Out-migration and shrinkage were identified as issues in the majority of towns, linked to the availability and quality of work and the subsequent departure of young people. Yet the creativity and drive of younger generations were also considered strengths in Kajaani and Velenje. Some opportunities associated with shrinkage or a lack of development were also noted, such as the availability of vacant space in Heerlen, or low land costs leading to significant house-building in Corby. Economic diversification and the establishment of small or medium sized businesses were considered other factors of resilience in Corby and Velenje. Yet cultural and social factors of passivity, a lack of entrepreneurial mentality and traditionalism were also noted as key impediments to adaptation in a number of the towns.

The diagram overleaf consolidates the findings across all five towns, highlighting the key strengths and weaknesses which emerged for each social sustainability dimension as a whole.

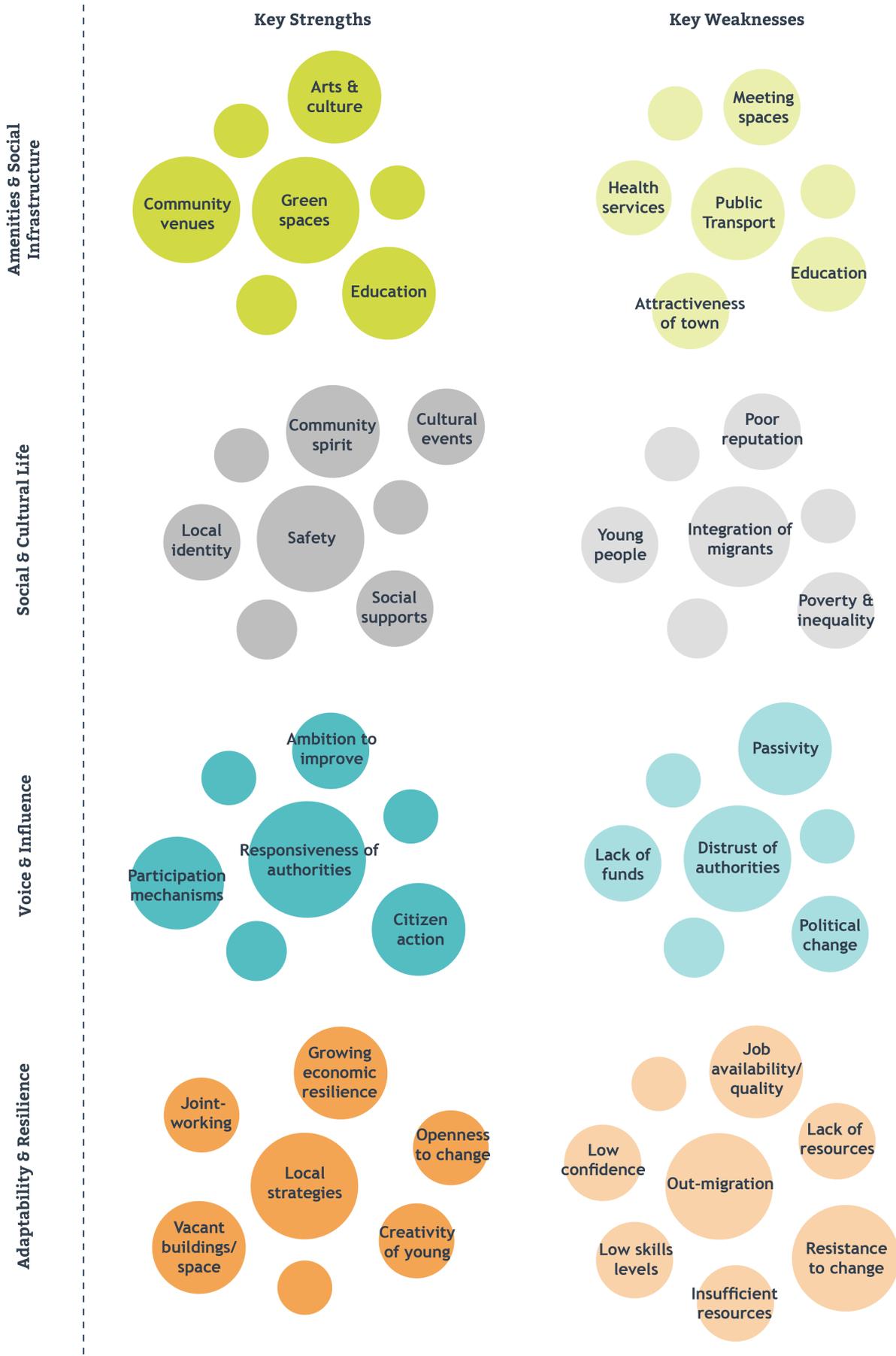
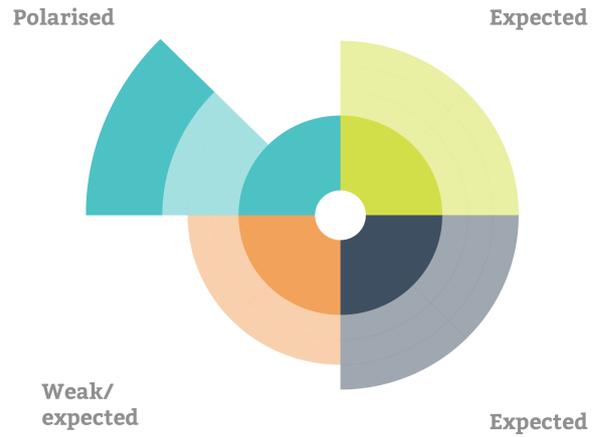


Figure 4: Key strengths and weaknesses across case study towns.

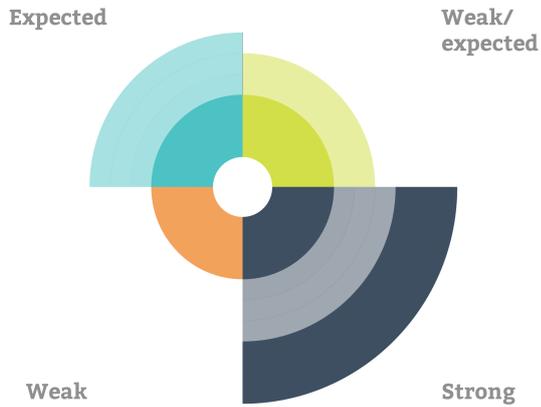
**Corby, UK**



**Fieni, Romania**



**Heerlen, Netherlands**



**Kajaani, Finland**



**Velenje, Slovenia**

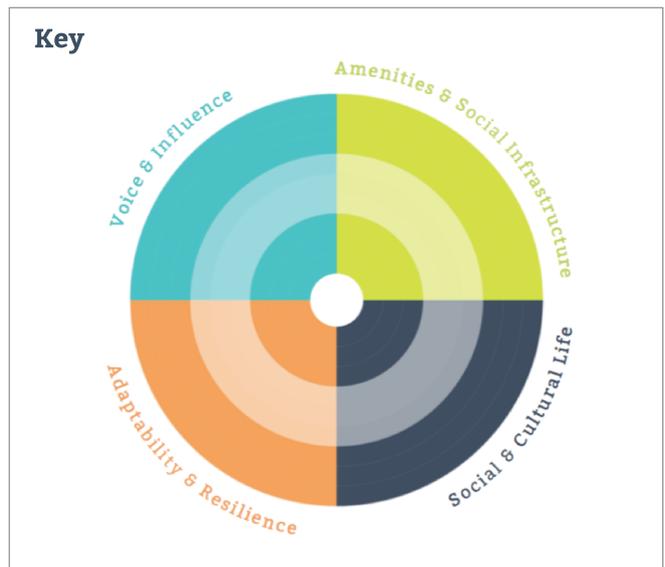
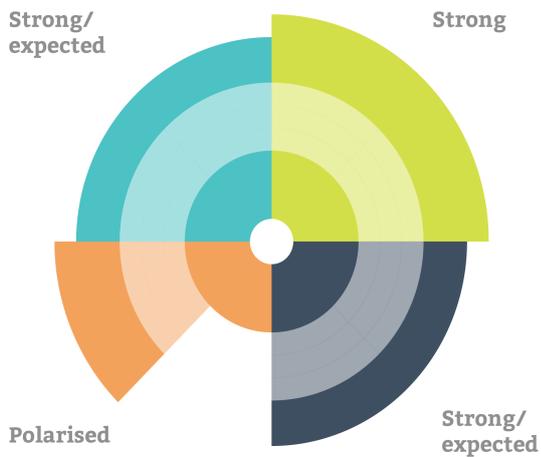


Figure 5: Overall scores for social sustainability dimensions in each case study town.

### 3.2 Comparative analysis of social sustainability in case study towns

The social sustainability assessments point to some shared assets which relate to the qualities and characteristics of smaller urban units. In Velenje, the town's scale and a high sense of belonging are felt to facilitate collaboration, citizen participation and communication. This is echoed in other towns and may be evidenced in what are perceived to be close relationships between municipal authorities and their citizens, which were noted to be relatively accessible to residents. Other strengths identified may also be linked with small scale settlements - including greater affordability, particularly in relation to housing, the accessibility of nature, and the ease of everyday life noted in compact Kajaani. Close community relationships were also felt to be derived from being part of a smaller urban unit. Yet some of these assets exist in concert with vulnerabilities. In Kajaani, a clannish mentality and rigidity were also felt to derive from its small and stable population, a quality echoed in Velenje where a "miner's mentality" is felt to manifest in passivity, corruption and a lack of ambition. Likewise, the counterpoint to high levels of social capital associated with strong community supports, may be hostility to newcomers or migrant groups noted in all the towns with significant migrant populations.

Concerns relating to young people cross-sect the dimensions of social sustainability. Topmost among these is a concern around the outmigration of younger generations, with few high skilled opportunities on offer in the towns to retain those with higher skills. In Fieni and Corby, the lack of participation or voice among young people was considered a key issue. A lack of pride among younger generations who have lived through a period of decline in the town was also considered a challenge in Fieni, while low aspirations and confidence among young people was noted in Corby. Preoccupations with the experiences and aspirations of younger generations relate to a wider concern and uncertainty around the future of the towns; most of the case study towns are affected by shrinkage and ageing - Corby stands apart in having a growing population.

The assessments bring to light some conflicts between the different pillars of sustainable development, as noted by a number of scholars (Boström 2012). In Corby, the fast-growing warehousing and distribution industry has brought many jobs to the town and diversified the employment landscape, in some respects strengthening the town's economic sustainability. Yet the poor-quality work associated with the sector is linked to lower wellbeing among residents, many of whom are working anti-social shift patterns at low pay. Likewise, a more fragmented economic landscape - seen as desirable by the town's authorities in reducing the risks presented by a single local employer - has diminished the capacity of organised labour to address poor working conditions. This raises questions for policymakers around prioritising the at times competing goals of sustainable development.

Parallels can be found between towns with a similar historical trajectory. Corby and Heerlen have both experienced several decades since the closure of a dominant heavy industry, in 1980 and 1974 respectively. In the following decades, both towns recorded the growth of social ills associated with urban decline, such as crime, anti-social behaviour and substance abuse. These point to the "long shadow" of industrial closures noted by Beatty & Fothergill (2017). In more recent years, the towns have established strategies to deal with these issues with some degree of success. The closure of industry also spurred Corby and Heerlen to pursue alternative development strategies. In doing so, they have both gained experience of recovery and joint-working, which are felt to contribute to their resilience. Yet the large-scale physical regeneration projects undertaken as part of these strategies, Corby's new civic building 'the Cube' and Heerlen's mixed-use 'Moonquarter' redevelopment, have polarized residents and become focal points for complaints around political mismanagement, illustrating the limits of projects perceived as top-down.

In Velenje and Fieni, a more recent history of market liberalization in the post-socialist period has brought in foreign ownership of some of the town's major industrial employers. Weakened ties to the local community, as well as the demands of maintaining global competitiveness, have brought about significant job losses (Fieni), and a diminished sense of social responsibility towards the town (Velenje). In Velenje, this has impacted on the town's environmental sustainability, as well as weakening the influence of residents and authorities over the town's economic future. These examples illustrate the close inter-relations between economic structures within the towns and the various dimensions of social sustainability.

Some positive qualities were also attributed to the industrial, or formerly industrial character of the towns. In Velenje, values of solidarity and close social supports were linked to a wider concept of 'industrial culture' associated with the town (e.g. Harfst et al. 2018). The activism provoked by the closure of the steelworks in Corby, as well as the strong presence of unions during the period of the steelworks, were felt to contribute to the strength of the 'voice and influence' dimension of social sustainability.

While the assessments found a strong sense of local identity, or pride in several of the towns, these were met with concerns around negative external perceptions. A poor reputation was identified as a key weakness in several towns and was felt to detract from efforts to regenerate the towns or attract external interest. It also provoked a sense of defensiveness, or perceived injustice among residents. These findings point to the importance of both internal and external narratives in shaping a sense of place, as highlighted in the earlier work of Bright Future. It also alludes to the potential psychic injuries of discursive marginalisation, whereby places are cast as 'left behind' or worse in national narratives. In turn, this points to the importance of the cultural aspects of alternative development strategies which place local assets, histories and traditions at their centre.



## **4. Review of local histories of social innovation**

## 4. Review of local histories of social innovation

In this section we summarise and compare the findings of a participatory review of the history of social innovation in each case study town. The objective of the review was to explore earlier traditions and instances of social innovation and action and the enabling factors that underpinned them, in order to provide inspiration for the final stage of the project - developing new social innovation ideas. Another objective of the review related to capturing data on some of the qualities and characteristics of social innovation in industrial towns more broadly. The review process was centred on a workshop where participants explored examples of local social innovation. Many participants drew on their own experiences and projects they were personally involved with, hence the review should not be considered representative of the wider field of social innovation in each of the towns but rather a snapshot of previous social action. Some teams carried out supplementary research to uncover and explore other examples, as well as the changing context for innovation locally.

### 4.1 Summary of review of local histories of social innovation in case study towns

#### Corby, United Kingdom

The review revealed a significant number of social innovations in Corby, with thirteen examples explored in depth by workshop participants. These, along with further examples uncovered by the research team, highlight how Corby's evolving economic, civic and social architecture, has helped shape the qualities of social action and innovation locally. During the period of the steelworks Corby shared many of the characteristics of company towns and much social infrastructure was developed under the auspices of the steelworks, from the calendar of community events, to its trade and labour clubs. Around the time of the steelworks closure, local networks galvanised to support striking steelworkers and their families through initiatives such as a soup kitchen and a strikers' supermarket. Following the closure, growing social needs provided the impetus for new social innovations, such as the Pen Green Centre, a pioneering holistic family centre still in operation today.

Since the 2000s, some innovations have reflected the local authority's ambitious drive to recast Corby into a forward-looking town. New voluntary sector projects have proliferated in recent years, responding to ongoing social challenges, including a lack of opportunity for young people, anti-social behaviour and mental health issues. While funding cuts over the past decade have affected many initiatives, some social enterprises have been better able to weather funding cuts, such as Adrenaline Alley which has become the largest indoor urban sports centre in Europe. Digital technologies have also enabled new forms of social solidarity, evident in online crowd-funding campaigns, like the Save Corby Urgent Care campaign and digital support groups.

A number of themes emerged from the review. Partnership-working between the local authority and civil society groups has been at the heart of many initiatives, a smaller number also noted connections with local businesses. Corby has been adept at attracting in external resources, from large-scale regeneration funding, to targeted national grant pots and expertise has built locally around tapping into such opportunities through public or voluntary sector partnerships. A lack of continuity in funding was considered an issue by those involved in the voluntary sector, with novelty often favoured over ensuring existing programmes are supported. The review of interviews conducted during WP III revealed a few distinctive social innovations which often feature in residents' accounts of the town. These can be considered *emblematic innovations*, which are used to counter negative perceptions of Corby and offer alternative narratives to oftentimes stigmatising media portrayals of the town.

## Fieni, Romania

The review indicated that the importance of social innovation has not been significant for this small urban community. Under the communist regime, the period of collectivization of agriculture and forced industrialization made citizen or municipal action to respond to local needs, or the affirmation of the creative capacity, near impossible. Therefore, it proved difficult to identify historic social innovations and a small number of innovations were identified from the past: local vineyards in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and a milk cooperative at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were considered social innovations because of they represented something new, drew on local products and values, and were a part of the economic life of the community. Local social infrastructure was also noted to have been developed in the 1930s with the support of the cement factory. ‘Voluntary patriotic work’, a concept well-known in the communist times and implemented in different sectors of activity, also contributed to social projects in the town.

In the present day a number of innovations were identified. The recent creation of a tourist office locally was highlighted, which has brought interest and generated new investments locally. A new ambulance service has improved access to healthcare in recent years. The creation of a park in the centre of the town is now considered an important local amenity for residents, while a library has been re-opened within a formerly abandoned building. These are all considered to have brought significant benefits to the residents of the town. Two recently established businesses were also identified as social innovations: a taxi sharing service created by a local resident in response to a lack of public transport in the town and a new local enterprise started by young entrepreneurs seeking to sell local produce. However, it was noted that social innovations have generated few jobs locally, which is considered a key need in the town.

## Heerlen, the Netherlands

Workshop participants in Heerlen discussed eight examples of social innovation from the past and present-day. The majority of these could be categorized as cultural-creative in nature, which can partly be attributed to the cultural policy set forth by the local government. The projects all sought to strengthen the relationships between residents and the town using a variety of means, for example, through the active engagement of residents in city activities, or attempts to improve Heerlen’s image among residents who often think negatively about their own city. Other initiatives like the *Jaar van de Mijnen* [The Year of the Mines], while still concerned with improving the relationship between Heerlen and its residents, had a particular focus on remembering the town’s mining tradition and heritage.

The participants noted a number of factors and characteristics which underpinned the success of social innovations in the past. Topmost among these was some type of *connecting factor*, meaning projects which contribute to a sense of community and bring residents, the local government and other parties into contact with one another. Innovations were also considered successful in the way they present Heerlen to the outside world, as a place which has something to offer and is worth visiting. The participants noted the importance of such initiatives to have broad support locally in order to succeed. The participants also mentioned themes of *authenticity*, all of the named innovations were recognizable to the residents of Heerlen and coincided with a shared idea concerning the type of city they had constructed. On this note, participants added that these innovations contributed to a growing self-confidence, self-consciousness, courage and entrepreneurial spirit for the residents of Heerlen, eliciting a ‘do it yourself’ culture. It was noted by participants that one successful initiative or event can create a positive spiral in which residents go on to be involved in more actions.

On a more practical note, the participants viewed the innovations described as long-term processes. It was felt that initiatives and organisations that have proven their value should be able to rely on multi-year funding. Indeed, participants noted a significant need for longer term financing in addition to more readily available start-up investment. In some cases, the local government’s role was described as facilitating (for example taking away bureaucratic obstacles) and providing financial support, while it was felt that ideas for initiatives and activities generally sprout from residents themselves, rather than the municipal

authorities. Individuals with the power of persuasiveness and with broad local networks were also noted as important to the success of social innovations locally.

### **Kajaani, Finland**

Before the Second World War, the timber company played a crucial role in developing Kajaani's services and social infrastructure - it paid for the houses, schools, kindergartens, and health care for its workers and supported the local cultural life. Its role as a service provider diminished post-war as the responsibilities and capacities of the state broadened. Today, there are a wide range of NGOs operating in the town focused on range of issues linked to social needs locally.

During the workshop, participants presented a range of innovations which were recent or ongoing. Many of the social innovations dealt with young people and their well-being, such as Ohjaamo Nuppa, which brought together previously dispersed youth services under one roof. The examples offered also highlight the wealth of grassroots activism in the cultural sector and a 'do-it-yourself-mentality'. It was noted that even though some of the social innovations have been initiated by the public sector, many are based on the activity of individual residents and groups. For instance, the Generaattori is a theatre occupying a once disused building in the town which is managed by a creative cooperative. Environmental values also play an essential role in many social innovations, such as Green Care which promotes the use of nature and animals for health services, this highlights a shift in conceptions of nature as a form of economic resource, to a source of individual and community wellbeing. Promoting environmental sustainability is also at the heart of the Entrinki Recycling Centre, a facility which recycles and repairs old goods, drawing on the support of local volunteers.

### **Velenje, Slovenia**

Through the workshop and supplementary research, fourteen practices, services, and organisational forms that could be categorized as social innovations were identified between 1945 and the present day. Early examples include 'Shock Work' a practice of volunteering in the construction of local infrastructure, which was common during the socialist period and particularly nurtured in Velenje. Its legacy is felt to endure in the highly developed and formalised volunteer system in existence in the town today.

Another important tradition of social innovation was spurred by a local environmental crisis in the 1980s. The mass mobilisation of citizens resulted in the first environmental referendum in Yugoslavia, followed by the formation of the town's Ecological Society and establishment of a local branch of the Green Party. Local knowledge of environmental remediation eventually resulted in the establishment of the Environmental Protection School in Velenje, demonstrating the far-reaching changes triggered by mass citizen action. Gradual changes to the social and economic fields in the post-socialist period brought about new needs. In 1996, a pioneering youth centre was established, a first of its kind in Slovenia, which offered a wide-range of activities and programmes. Slovenia's accession to the European Union also prompted new practices, for example the creation of the regional incubator to promote micro-entrepreneurship.

A range of examples of innovations from recent years were also offered which seek to promote social inclusion among potentially marginalised groups, such as a transportation service for the elderly or physically impaired, or a holiday day-care service for children. Enhancing citizen participation is the objective of Co-Shaping Velenje, an online portal for citizen initiatives.

All the innovations depended on close collaboration, in particular between civil society and the local authorities; this remained a constant despite the shifts in the political system during the period. Whereas the involvement of the mining company, the second major employer in the town which had previously supported several successful social innovations, had diminished in recent years. A shift can also be identified over the past decade in the growth of "bottom-up" initiatives, it was noted that these have often been contingent on the open-mindedness and support of the local authority.



Figure 6: Heerlen, the Netherlands. One of the many murals in the town, part of a project to make Heerlen a destination for street art. Source: Katherine VanHoose



Figure 7: Corby, United Kingdom. Adrenaline Alley, a social enterprise which has become Europe's largest indoor urban sports venue. Source: Adrenaline Alley.

## 4.2 Comparative analysis of local histories of social innovation

Documenting the history of social innovation in our case study towns gives a sense of the breadth and wealth of social innovation taking place in SMITs, as defined by their residents. In Corby, Heerlen, Kajaani and Velenje, we found much citizen-led action responding to local needs both in the past and present day. While the political and economic development of Fieni during the communist period was noted to have restricted the field of individual action or municipal autonomy, a number of social innovations were still identified.

Participants in the review employed a broad definition of social innovation. In Fieni, enterprises which provided a clear response to local social needs, even while operating as for-profit businesses, were included. Everyday social infrastructure, such as youth clubs, were also cited in several towns. This may reflect the participants in the workshop, it may also indicate the value ascribed by community members to social actions and supports based on their effectiveness, rather than their innovativeness. Indeed, an over emphasis on the new - with start-up funding relatively easily available - versus continuity and ongoing funding for existing services or interventions, was criticised by some participants.

Many social innovations documented represented ideas adapted from elsewhere and implemented locally, such as the “Gerbrookerbos” method piloted in Heerlen, a bike sharing scheme launched in Velenje, or Fieni’s tourism centre. This accords with definitions of social innovation which stress that approaches which are new to a context can be considered social innovations. It also highlights town’s receptiveness to ideas from elsewhere and connections to wider networks of social innovation, challenging notions of ‘left behindness’ often associated with SMITs. There were a few examples of wholesale new or pioneering approaches, such as Electric Corby, a social enterprise seeking to make the town into a demonstration location for green technologies.

The relationship between perceived local needs and social action is clearly revealed by the review, which highlights the embeddedness of social innovation to its context. For example in Velenje, environmental damage prompted a mass citizen mobilisation and a set of innovative responses. While in Corby and Kajaani, a recent focus on actions to address young people’s needs are a response to concerns that the towns have little to offer or retain their young people. The use of local assets, as identified within the social sustainability assessment, was also evidenced. In Kajaani, Green Care draws on the proximity of nature as a basis for its health and wellbeing services; Corby’s Adrenaline Alley is housed in some of the town’s cheap industrial spaces; or in Velenje, strong local dialogue and traditions of collaboration support social innovations today. Others, such as Heerlen’s Year of the Mines, draw specifically on local histories to build their citizens’ connection to the town and a sense of local identity.

Tracing the history of social innovation in our case study towns also highlights interesting parallels among SMITs. In Corby, Fieni and Velenje, social innovation and action during the mid-twentieth century was marked by the key role of the company or main economic interest in the town in providing and supporting both basic services, as well as the cultural and social infrastructure. Newer fragmented economies, or foreign ownership, were perceived to have diminished the role of businesses in the social life of towns, reducing the resources available locally for social innovation. However, this shift can also be said to offer advantages, with greater democratic governance over local initiatives and citizen-led action coming to the fore. Indeed, the review highlights the growing role of the civic sector as well as individuals in a number of towns, such as Heerlen and Kajaani, where a ‘do it yourself’ culture was identified. As noted in Heerlen, individuals driving these projects tended to be people with discursive power and large social networks. The importance of collaboration was also repeatedly emphasised and many projects explored were supported by partnerships between civic sector groups and the local authority, as well as external partners and, at times, local businesses.

In several towns, the role of municipal authorities was perceived as primarily supportive, creating enabling conditions for social innovations led by citizens and groups, rather than acting as the driving force. For example in Heerlen, it was noted that the municipality should be a facilitator and funder of social innovation, removing obstacles and providing financial support for citizen initiatives. In Velenje the ‘open-

mindedness' of the local authority was considered important in supporting, co-creating and co-managing projects. Heerlen's Smart Campus and Velenje's regional business incubator also highlight the efforts of local authorities to actively stimulate innovation in both the social and economic sphere.

The role of social innovation in attracting positive interest in the towns was also revealed by the review. Initiatives such as Fieni's tourist information centre or Heerlen's street art project explicitly aim to draw visitors to the town. Other projects, such as the Pen Green Centre in Corby, featured as part of the counter narratives set out by residents in response to negative portrayals of the town. This indicates that while some social innovations do not set out to raise the town's profile, they can have secondary outcome of attracting interest and building pride in SMITs, understood through the social sustainability assessment to be a key need locally.



## 5. Developing new ideas for social innovations

## 5. Developing new ideas for social innovations

The final phase of WP4 focused on developing a set of practical ideas which would respond to some of the challenges set out within the social sustainability assessment. A final workshop was held in each case study town. Participants worked in groups on three exercises, using materials prepared ahead of the workshop. The first exercise was aimed at defining the problem that the group were seeking to address. Participants were asked to pinpoint the underlying factors, the groups affected by the issue and any previous responses locally. During the second exercise, the teams used prompts to help them generate ideas for social innovations, brainstorming different kinds of approaches, before selecting one to focus on. In the third and final exercise, groups used worksheets to develop their ideas. The following section sets out a summary of the ideas developed in each case study town.

### 5.1 Ideas developed

Corby, United Kingdom	
Issue area	Idea for social innovation
<i>Improving the town</i>	<p><b>The Corby Pound</b></p> <p>The Corby Pound takes its inspiration from other local currencies in the UK. The group recognised that alternative currencies can act as emblematic social innovations, helping to attract external interest and develop a sense of local identity. The design of the coinage and notes was considered an opportunity to increase awareness of Corby's heritage.</p>
<i>Supporting wellbeing</i>	<p><b>Online/ offline walks</b></p> <p>Walks organised using social media which would be open for all to participate. They would be aimed at tackling social isolation and promoting physical activity, particularly among those with poor mental health. The act of walking itself was noted to enable easier conversations and interactions than face-to-face situations, helping build confidence around social interactions.</p>
<i>Community integration</i>	<p><b>Corby Community Forum</b></p> <p>A community forum which would bring together different groups to share experiences and participate in conversations to help shape town. This was conceived as a response to a lack of engagement between minority groups and longstanding community.</p>
<i>Opportunities for young people</i>	<p><b>Shout! Alternative voice for Corby</b></p> <p>A youth-led community conversation focused on the challenges faced by young people in Corby. This would be conducted through various forums, including 'guest listener' sessions, where those with decision-making power in the town would hear from young people about their concerns. Engagement through schools and other youth services was also suggested.</p>
<i>Opportunities for young people</i>	<p><b>YAPP</b></p> <p>An app designed for local young people which would be a 'one stop shop' for information on events, activities and services they can access locally, helping young people know what is out there. The process of designing and building the app itself would be an opportunity for local young people to develop their skills.</p>

<b>Fieni, Romania</b>	
<b>Issue area</b>	<b>Idea for social innovation</b>
<i>Issues relating to local agriculture</i>	<p><b>Digital platform for local producers</b></p> <p>Local agricultural producers lack an association and are struggling to survive. It was felt a digital platform could provide a relatively low-cost way for local producers to promote their products. It could also support animal husbandry and provide employment options for local residents.</p>
<i>Local employment and economic development</i>	<p><b>New educational specialisations</b></p> <p>Development of local educational services to create new specialisations in order to obtain more complex qualification profiles for high school graduates: profiles for freight drivers, mechanics, electricians or jobs linked to the cement industry were suggested.</p>
<i>Local employment and economic development</i>	<p><b>Museum of the town</b></p> <p>This would focus on local history and traditional crafts. The museum could generate new jobs for the employees of the museum, as well as helping to attract investment in Fieni by increasing the town's visibility.</p>
<i>Impact of depopulation</i>	<p><b>Re-organisation of owners' associations</b></p> <p>Following the emigration of many residents the existing owners' associations for apartment blocks in Fieni were dissolved due to a lack of resources and participation. These associations played an important role in community activities and maintenance. It was suggested that these associations should be restarted with a structure appropriate for the town's smaller population.</p>

<b>Heerlen, the Netherlands</b>	
<b>Issue area</b>	<b>Idea for social innovation</b>
<i>Tackling an unattractive city centre / retaining young people</i>	<p><b>Fill vacant properties in town centre</b></p> <p>Participants proposed having the local government force developers and property owners to actively find tenants for their empty housing stock. The newly available properties would be used for resident initiatives and start-ups, rather than commercial uses, which would increase the liveliness of the city centre.</p>
<i>Retaining young people</i>	<p><b>Promote youthful image</b></p> <p>A range of ideas were put forward focused on creating a youthful, positive image of Heerlen. Ideas included making more use of social media to employ well-known as well as ordinary residents as 'ambassadors' of the city, and to organize more activities and events for students, including a student association and a sports club.</p>
<i>Improving resident's socioeconomic position</i>	<p><b>Basic income</b></p> <p>A basic income was proposed for residents as a replacement for the current social welfare benefits system, which has become increasingly restrictive and punitive. This would improve the position of disadvantaged residents. The idea draws on the experiences of other municipalities in the Netherlands, as responsibility for the welfare benefits system has recently been devolved from the national government to the municipal level and a basic income is being piloted in other locations.</p>
<i>Improving the town's socioeconomic position</i>	<p><b>Legalisation of cannabis</b></p> <p>Through legalisation, a number of benefits could be achieved including increased tax receipts for local government, less spending on policing, and a safer and higher quality product. Linkages could be made with other strong regional economic sectors e.g. the chemical industry, medical industry, and agriculture. While ironic, this idea would be a 'positive' spin-off on the history of drug use in Heerlen in the 1980s and 1990s. It was posited that the skills needed to carry out the cultivation of marijuana are already present in the population.</p>

## Kajaani, Finland

Issue area	Idea for social innovation
<i>Social isolation</i>	<p><b>Pop-up meeting place</b></p> <p>A temporary meeting place designed to gather different actors and organisations in Kajaani. In order to ensure it catered to a range of groups, the space would need to be neutral, free, and non-alcoholic. It would not only be a meeting place but also a place to find information and make contact with other local actors. The group proposed a six-month testing phase before the meeting place would be made permanent. The participation of the local authorities would be required - a representative of the local authority who was a participant in the workshop offered to present free spaces in the town which could be used.</p>
<i>Lack of skilled workforce</i>	<p><b>Workplace learning</b></p> <p>A programme of supported workplace learning. This would be a resource for local companies that are suffering from a shortage of labour. The programme would offer education for employees or prospective employees with professional support (e.g. teachers, supervisors). The scheme would be designed to promote attachment among those most likely to move away. The idea was targeted principally at three groups: 1) international students and immigrants, (for them, this would be gateway to Finnish working life and culture), 2) small and medium sized enterprises, and 3) second degree and higher education students.</p>

## Velenje, Slovenia

Issue area	Idea for social innovation
<i>Bipolar and vulnerable economy</i>	<p><b>Fish farm</b></p> <p>This group proposed a possible way to diversify the economy and to take care of low-skilled workers currently at-risk of unemployment is to establish a fish farm in the Lake Šalek area. The farm would be based on a public-private partnership and could employ up to 80 people. The lakes have already been transforming into attractive recreational and tourist areas, so any kind of practical idea for regeneration would be positively accepted in the local environment. It could also be a part of a plan for the mine closure, which would help with securing funds to start-up. If such an idea were to be realized, it would have many benefits for the local community: new jobs (also for the low-skilled population), efficient use of natural resources (also as a compensation for lost arable land), and an incentive for strengthening new economic branches that were being slowed down due to the predominant role of two major companies.</p>
<i>Unclear future after the coal mine closure</i>	<p><b>Strengthening &amp; professionalization of the NGO sector</b></p> <p>This group proposed a solution to dealing with social issues in the future is to build up the NGO sector, making it less dependent on voluntary work, with a higher number of professional staff. A stronger NGO sector would be able to develop innovative programs for the social inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups and employ young people with a background in social sciences &amp; humanities. The programs would also include volunteers (youth, elderly), not as the main pillar, but rather as a support and opportunity for gaining skills, additional income and social inclusion. This would encourage young educated people to stay in their home town and help overcome the potential social issues after the coal mine closes. Financial resources to build up an NGO sector would include municipal budget reallocation, tenders, etc.</p>
<i>Out-migration of educated young population</i>	<p><b>Mentoring scheme</b></p> <p>This group proposed a work orientation program in the form of a mentoring scheme. The idea is that older workers would guide new, younger ones for a few years until they retire. This would give them an additional financial incentive in exchange for not extending their retirement age. Such a mechanism, managed by a business incubator or employment office, would help young, educated people to capitalize on their know-how and stay in their home town, help employers to recognize the potential and ideas of young people and bridge the gap between the economy and educational institutions.</p>

## 5.2 Comparative analysis of social innovation ideas developed

Participants in the workshops developed a range of ideas that responded to the priority challenges they perceived for the town. Some themes can be identified across the issues addressed. A number of groups focused on young people, both a perceived lack of voice and opportunity, as well as the need to create structures and incentives which would encourage them to stay. Economic issues, such as the need for new employment opportunities, were also selected as a focus for innovation ideas in all the towns except Corby. A few groups focused on other social issues - in Corby, the need for better community integration was addressed, while in Kajaani one group chose to tackle growing loneliness and social isolation. A number of ideas addressed improving the attractiveness of the town more broadly.

Several ideas drew inspiration from existing models. For instance, the Corby Pound draws on local currencies piloted elsewhere in the UK, or Kajaani's pop up meeting place has resonances with meanwhile uses proposed for vacant properties. A couple of ideas point to wholly innovative models. In Velenje, a scheme to use older workers to mentor young people offered a new way of building skills, connections and increasing the availability of work by providing an incentive for older mentors to retire on time. This innovation builds on the values and traditions of industrial culture (e.g. Harfst et al. 2018), by accessing tacit knowledge, building on existing competences, community feeling and solidarity. In Corby, one group proposed 'guest listener' sessions as part of a programme of activities to increase youth voice, whereby those who hold positions of authority of the town would be invited to listen to the concerns of young people. This reversal of an everyday practice entails a temporary inversion of power relations, whereby otherwise marginalised voices are placed centre stage.

Some projects could be conceived as restorative, attempting to bring back something which has been lost locally. Kajaani's problems were defined in relation to the closure of the teacher education unit and the attendant loss of activity in the town. The pop-up meeting place was in part a bid to redress this. Likewise, in Fieni, one group sought to recreate the owner's associations, participative structures which had ceased to exist following the exodus of many local residents. These examples point to a framing of innovation that looks backwards, rather than forwards. It alludes to the conservatism identified in the social sustainability assessments for both towns, yet it also underlines the importance for residents of conserving existing structures seen to be of social value.

The process was oriented towards generating practical solutions for the towns. It was left to participants themselves to define the practical, which led to proposals that ranged widely in their scope. Some grassroots responses to social needs were proposed, these fit into the first level of social innovation identified by BEPA (2010). For instance the 'online/offline walks' idea from Corby could be initiated with the impetus of a sole resident and little requirement for funding, likewise the town ambassadors proposed as part of one group in Heerlen could be developed with low levels of financial support. Others tie into BEPA's second category of innovation which address societal challenges and blur the lines between the social and the economic. For example, participants in Velenje developed an idea for a fish farm, while in Fieni the creation of a local museum was put forward. These are larger scale projects which would necessitate significant investment, the support of authorities and a wider network of actors, alongside the perseverance of individuals. A few ideas chimed with the wider systemic changes which constitute BEPA's third category of social innovation, for instance the institution of a Universal Basic Income proposed in Heerlen.

These different scales of innovation indicate different imaginaries of social change, which can be linked to a number of factors. A more decentralised policy context in the Netherlands, where municipalities have recently acquired powers over welfare and social policies, offers wider scope for policy change at the local level. The kinds of actor who participated in the workshop also influenced the imagined spheres of possibility for social innovation. In Corby, a group composed predominantly of actors from civil society put forward ideas which relate closely to the kinds of action typically implemented by local third sector groups - these were small scale project-based ideas, rather than policy-based or larger scale regeneration initiatives. More mixed groups in other workshops proposed ideas with an economic or policy basis.

Overall, the workshops proposed a range of creative ideas which drew on local assets, such as existing social capital, or vacant spaces locally. Yet an idea is only a first step, questions remain around who takes ownership and responsibility for developing, testing and implementing the proposals (VanHoose 2019). While funding was repeatedly identified as a key barrier, the review of previous social innovations also highlighted the importance of persistent individuals, as well as buy-in and support from other institutions, to bring ideas to fruition. This points to the importance of supportive structures which enable citizens to pursue their ideas and provide home-grown responses to social challenges, particularly if towns want to go beyond the usual suspects and harness the talents and creativity of a wider section of the population.

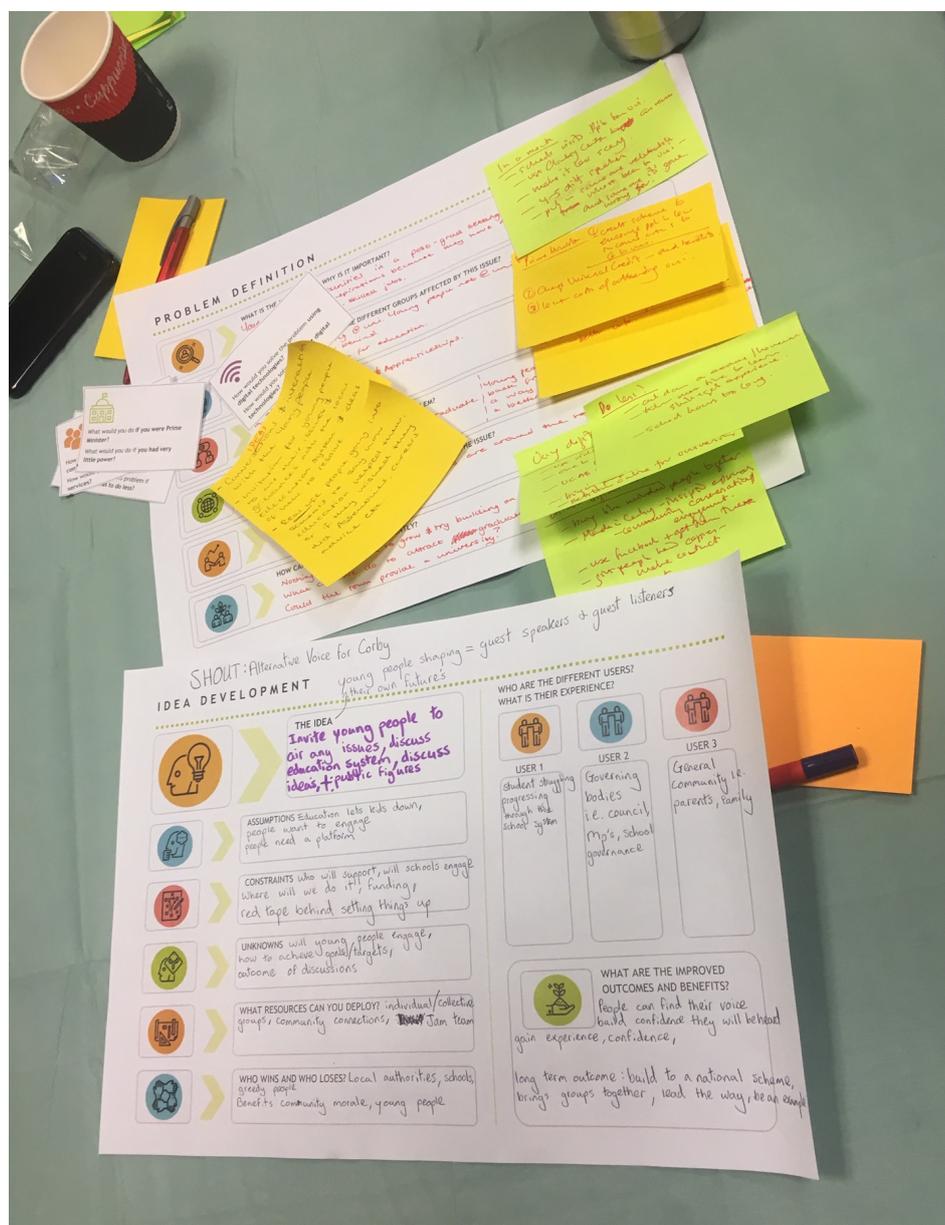


Figure 8: Worksheets used in the ideas development workshop.



## 6. Reflections on participatory methodology

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The following section sets out reflections on the methodology undertaken, its appropriateness across contexts, and its suitability for generating social innovation ideas. The methodology was grounded in the principles of participatory action research. A desire to ensure comparability between the case study towns meant a more prescriptive approach to research design was taken than might otherwise be used in participatory methodologies, which should aim to involve participants as active subjects both in the full research process (Bergold & Thomas 2012). The methodology also sought to recreate some of the enabling conditions for social innovation. Namely, an embeddedness in the local context (Reynolds et al. 2017), by both identifying local needs and assets through the social sustainability assessment, as well as building and understanding of the qualities of previous social action through the review of the history of social innovation. The workshops were also designed to enable collaboration among participants from different walks of life, understood to be another important dimension of social innovation.

Participatory methodologies prompt careful reflection on who is involved during the research process. While constrained by the scale of the workshop, the teams set out to engage a range of perspectives from different professional sectors and socio-demographic groups. However, all but one of the project teams noted it was not possible to assemble a representative cross-section of the town's population for the workshops and some key groups were missing, while others, such as civil society, were over-represented. In Corby and Heerlen, ethnic minorities were under-represented, while in Kajaani, working class residents directly affected by the closure of the paper mill were not present. This spoke to a number of factors: participants were primarily recruited through established networks, which tended towards more institutional or active citizens who had taken part in an earlier phase of research; the workshops also required a time commitment, which may not have been possible for residents whose professional interests did not overlap with the workshop topics. Across the case study towns, the process appealed primarily to those already engaged somewhat in the topic of social innovation, hence participants were principally *active* members of the community already undertaking initiatives or projects, oftentimes as part of civil society groups or the local authority. The profile of participants may also be indicative of who feels comfortable participating in deliberative forums, even those intended to be inclusive.

The social sustainability assessment was generally felt to be an appropriate and useful framework for analysing each town's assets and vulnerabilities. While the social sustainability framework seemed broadly applicable across the case study towns, what could be considered a strength or weakness varied significantly between contexts. A strength of the participatory method was in enabling residents themselves to decide what constitutes a local asset or vulnerability. However, the assessments also brought together a range of supplementary data sources outside of the participatory process and research teams assumed the authority over the final social sustainability assessment, defining the key strengths and weaknesses, as well as the overall score to apportion to each dimension. Combining these approaches raises questions of whose voices or which data to privilege and balancing perspectives was a challenge for the research teams. As a response, some teams applied more rationalist or objective frameworks to assess the dimensions and prioritise the issues, asking participants to rank issues, or counting positives or negatives to assess overall strengths and weaknesses. Doing so provided a counterpoint to some dominant public discourses, which privileged different issues. Yet it was noted that who participates in the workshop would likely influence its outcomes.

The review of the history of social innovation was intended to provide further context and inspiration for the development of new responses to local challenges. This phase of the process was felt to vary in effectiveness across the project contexts, in Kajaani it was the least well attended of the workshops and its contribution to the process was felt to be unclear. In Fieni, historical factors and less familiarity with the concept of social innovation led to greater difficulty in identifying previous instances. Whereas in Corby, the workshop was positively received and participants were highly engaged in sharing examples from the town's past and present-day. While only a partial review, it proved useful from the point of gathering data

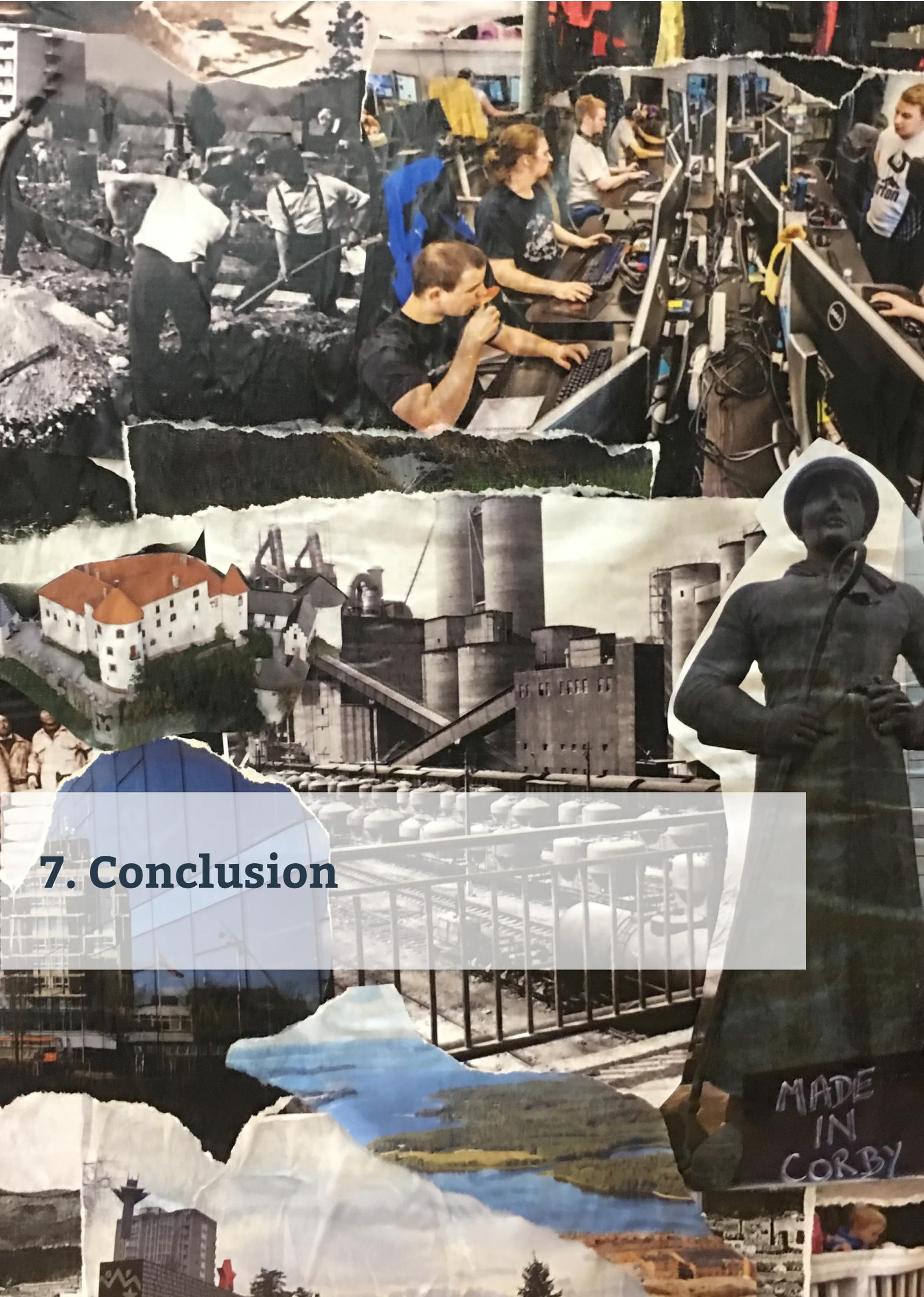
on some of the qualities and characteristics of social innovation in SMITs, a topic on which little research has been done to date. This highlights one of the potential tensions in participatory action research, where gathering useful data does not always serve the practical purpose of the action process.

The social innovation process was implemented successfully in each location, achieving its stated aims of generating a series of ideas to address challenges facing the localities. The range and nature of ideas developed points to their embeddedness within the local context. They also highlighted the creativity of participants and their ability to conceive of home-grown solutions for local issues. As discussed in the previous section, there are questions as to the extent to which some of the ideas might be considered 'practical'. Some ideas developed were also based on the existing ideas of participants, rather than generated through the participatory process of problem definition, idea generation and idea development, around which the final workshop was structured. While existing ideas could offer appropriate solutions it posed an issue for thinking afresh around the problem identified. It also highlighted a broader issue with the workshop process and the dynamics of collaboration, whereby more dominant voices can silence or marginalise the less confident. Structured workshops which used pre-prepared materials to some extent helped counterbalance these tendencies, professional facilitation was also considered of value in Heerlen, yet in Velenje it was not able to overcome the dominance of certain voices.

In general, feedback received indicated a positive response from participants and many were enthused to take their ideas forward. However, there was some criticism and scepticism around the outputs of process. Some expressed concerns that little tangible would come from the discussions. To our knowledge at this point none of the social innovation ideas have been pursued further. Tying in an opportunity for the development or testing of ideas may be an appropriate extension of the methodology. Some other outcomes were, however, noted. In Corby, participants commented that the workshops were an opportunity to build relationships with others in the town and reflect on issues that they might not have otherwise considered. According to one participant, *"It gave me the opportunity to articulate and share aspirations and hope for the town - listening to what other people are feeling and planning is very useful."* A participant in Velenje involved in a local industry appreciated the value of reflecting on the social dimensions of future development, which would not normally fall within their remit. By forging new links and understanding among participants, the workshops can be considered to have contributed to building the "capacity to act", which forms part of the European Commission's definition of social innovation (BEPA 2011). As indicated by the review of previous innovation, it is not just ideas which are required for social innovation, financial resources, the perseverance of individuals, and the support of collaborative networks and local institutions are required to turn most ideas into reality.



Figure 9: Workshops in Velenje, Slovenia, and Heerlen, the Netherlands. Source: ZRC-SAZU and Marco Bontje.



## 7. Conclusion

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## 7. Conclusion

The social innovation process undertaken sought to generate a set of context-specific social innovations. It did so by using an assessment of the social sustainability of each case study town, alongside a review of their histories of social innovation, as prompts for developing new responses to local challenges. The coupling of social sustainability and social innovation chimes with a recent argument put forward by Millard (2018), that social innovation has long underpinned efforts around sustainable development and that the two concepts are closely intertwined. Where Millard looks to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a driver for social innovation, the 'social sustainability framework' used in our assessment provides a more holistic and locally-grounded means of understanding the extent to which places are supporting their residents' capacity to thrive (Woodcraft et al. 2012).

Applying the framework to five SMITs in different European countries pointed to some commonalities. The strength of local networks and social supports emerges as a common feature, this was at times linked to the legacy of industrial culture and traditions of social solidarity, as well as the scale of the settlements which enabled close relationships to develop. Smallness emerges as both a strength and weakness, contributing positively to quality of life among some residents, while also being associated with traits perceived as negative - such as insularity or backwardness. Many concerns across the towns centred on young people and how towns could retain their younger generations and face off the challenges of an ageing population. This speaks to wider fears for the future and a desire for models of alternative development which can meet the aspirations of today's young people. The negative reputations of the case study towns also featured as a key weakness for some residents, highlighting the impact of narratives on community wellbeing. The social sustainability assessments offer a tool to rebalance some of these negative portrayals by revealing local assets alongside vulnerabilities.

The divergences which could be observed among the towns were also illustrative. While all the towns had been buffeted by external forces which had rendered local industries unviable or at-risk, or significantly reduced their workforce, the agency of their citizens and authorities could be evidenced in the alternative paths that had been successfully plotted and new specialisms which had been developed. To an extent, these strategic paths can be attributed to the effectiveness and imagination of political actors and authorities locally. For the case study towns still dependent on one or two major local employers (Fieni & Velenje), the threat of closure and job losses still loom and economic issues dominate local concerns.

In Heerlen and Corby, decades on from the closure of a major heavy industry, the social effects of the loss were still evident, illustrating the "long shadow" of industrial closure highlighted by Beatty and Fothergill (2017). More fragmented economies which have emerged in their wake have created new social difficulties associated with low pay and low quality work. This points to tensions between the different goals of sustainable development, in particular how economic forms which are considered more economically resilient may also be socially-detrimental. It also highlights wider patterns associated with post-industrial development, where labour market deregulation and a loss of collective wage setting capacity have accompanied tertiarisation (Gornig and Goebel 2018). These tensions raise questions for local policymakers around which objectives to prioritise in their development strategies.

The review of the history of social innovation demonstrates the wide range of creative responses to challenges undertaken in SMITs, many of which have been citizen-driven. While a few were wholesale new approaches, many were inspired from elsewhere and highlighted the connections of towns to wider systems of innovation and action. Driving forward these new projects or approaches were often the determined efforts of individuals alongside supportive networks drawn both from inside the towns, particularly the local authority, as well as external partners. Where the review highlighted the once important role of industrial employers in supporting the social infrastructure of SMITs, the role of businesses was noted to have declined significantly in several towns. Some of the assets associated with SMITs underpinned the realisation of past innovations, such as the close existing networks and relationships, the accessibility of the local authority, and the availability of comparatively cheap space. The review also highlighted some

tensions in the discourse of innovation, where effective models were not sustained in spite of being shown to be effective. This points to a risk in institutional support favouring novelty over proven approaches, hence calls to innovate must be balanced with ensuring existing programmes which are valued are kept in place.

In the final stage of the process, participants generated a set of imaginative ideas for new approaches to tackle some of the key challenges facing their towns. While some teams proposed small-scale interventions, which could be readily implemented, others proposed larger scale resource-intensive projects, or policy-based solutions. Each of these forms of action represents a potentially fruitful way of responding to social challenges, yet the institutional supports required to make them a reality vary significantly and should be understood at the outset of any intentional social innovation process. The scope of the ideas also reveals the desire and imaginative capacity of citizens to shape larger scale projects and strategies, not just grassroots actions. Embedding processes to allow for meaningful citizen input at an early stage could help harness this creativity. Indeed, while participatory approaches are considered intrinsic to the social economy, the social sustainability assessment revealed that participatory processes are currently unevenly applied and could be developed much further.

The ideas proposed also stretched current notions of social innovation. A number of proposals were based on profit-making businesses, for example in Velenje a fish farm was conceived as an appropriate response to economic vulnerability and the threat of the future loss of low skilled jobs. This blurring of the divide between the economic and the social challenges some popular definitions of social innovation which stress their distinction from market-based solutions or, as underlined by TEPSIE (2014), emphasise a requirement for them to be 'social' in both their means as well as their ends. Where citizens prioritise job creation over other goals, models of business which embed a social purpose may prove relevant.

The process also highlighted the difficulties of securing the participation of a broad cross-section of individuals. It indicates the importance of active measures in securing wider input, this might be through working with intermediaries or taking discussions to the places where different groups feel comfortable. The problematics of inclusion also highlight a tension at the heart of social innovation practice. As revealed within the reviews of the history of social innovation, these often rely on the dedicated efforts of a set of individuals with confidence and social capital. Such *active* citizens tend to deviate from the norm, to form a small group within a larger population who are more passive. A balance therefore needs to be struck when creating institutional supports for social innovation, between inclusivity and ensuring ideas are translated into actions.

Overall, the process highlights the importance of territorially embedded approaches to social innovation, as argued by Van Dyck & Van den Broeck (2013: 138). These should draw on the many qualities and assets of SMITs. Enabling localised responses requires powers to be invested in authorities at a municipal level and participation to be devolved to a wider coalition of citizenry and local actors. Without these powers, social innovation risks being narrowly defined and incapable of meaningfully addressing the structural issues which underpin many social challenges. The next stage of this project will draw on these findings to explore how policy at a local, national and supra-national level might support the development of SMITs, taking into account a holistic agenda of sustainable development which places the social alongside the economic and environmental.

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