



Corby in its own words

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November 2018

Introduction

This report is part of Bright Future, a project focused on industrial towns across Europe.¹ In this project we're working with a simple idea: that the common account of 'post-industrial' towns and their inevitable decline we find in newspapers and reports isn't the whole picture. While a quarter of the European population live in them, industrial towns are often overlooked because of this limited viewpoint.

We believe that they have a huge amount to offer. Their industrial qualities mean that people who live and work in them can share particular skill sets and characteristics as part of their heritage. Industrial towns may also have other assets in their townscapes, traditions and communities we should recognise.

We think that we should work harder at understanding the experience of industrial towns, and listening to the needs and ideas of those living in them. There could also be different approaches to development for these places, distinct from those taken by larger towns and cities. These need to be considered and developed.

In this short report we present a summary of the conversations we've had in the last year, speaking with residents and community organisations about the town. We've summarised general ideas and perceptions that people have shared with us on Corby. As with almost any place, people have different opinions about where they live, but some clear themes emerged from our work.

About the project

Bright Future is an ESRC-funded project in association with JPI-Europe, working with people in small and medium industrial towns in Europe to explore their socioeconomic characteristics, qualities and underlying resilience. The research will feed into practical ideas and policy recommendations geared towards supporting industrial towns to thrive into the future.

1. We use the term 'industrial towns' to refer to towns which have a large manufacturing sector, alongside those often termed 'post-industrial', which have a significant recent industrial heritage.

About Corby

Corby is a town in Northamptonshire of 68,300 people which has experienced dramatic change over the past century.¹ In the early 1930s it was a village of 1,500 people. A steelworks was established in 1933 which would attract workers and propel it into an industrial town with a population of over 18,000 people by 1950.

When the steelworks was established many new residents moved to Corby from Scotland, as well as Wales, other parts of England, Ireland and Central European countries to find work. Today, the town's cultural life still celebrates this migrant heritage.

Corby was designated a New Town in 1950. Following this, a modern town centre was built along with new housing. Other industries joined the steelworks and the town's population continued to expand rapidly.

However, by the 1970s Britain's nationalised steel industry was in decline and Corby's steelworks were experiencing considerable financial losses. Their closure in 1979 led to the loss of an estimated 11,000 jobs in the town, coupled with other redundancies. During the 1980s Corby's unemployment rate hit 30%.

1. ONS mid-year population estimates, 2016.



Corby New Town in the 1950s. Source: Our Corby, Seaborne Archive.

From 1980 onwards a series of regeneration schemes helped to revive the town's fortunes, along with the actions of Corby citizens themselves, some of whom set up their own businesses or led redevelopment initiatives. Incentives were created for businesses to move to Corby, including through a Special Enterprise Zone. Although the success of individual businesses has fluctuated, Corby has gradually transitioned into an economy of diverse employers and industries.

In the early 2000s a new regeneration strategy was developed focused on housing and population growth and town centre renewal. New developments have subsequently reshaped the town, including a civic centre - the Corby Cube, an international swimming pool, a cinema and a shopping precinct. Transport links have been improved and Corby's railway station re-opened in 2009.

Population growth has been spurred through new housing developments which are redefining the town's borders, echoing the growth spurts it experienced as a 'New Town' in the 1950s and 60s. Corby aims to have 100,000 residents by 2030, nearly double its population in 2000. In doing so it has become the fastest-growing borough in England outside of London.

Today, around a quarter of the population are employed in manufacturing, while warehousing and distribution are significant growth sectors. While there are significant employment opportunities locally, low skilled, low paid and insecure work still characterise the a significant portion of the town's economy.



The Corby Cube, the town's new civic centre. Source: Social Life / The Young Foundation 2018.

Local perceptions of Corby

This is a summary of Corby residents' descriptions of the town. It is based on interviews carried out in 2017 and 2018 for the Bright Future project. During the interviews, we discussed people's memories of the town, their experiences of local life, and their thoughts on Corby's key assets and challenges.

Interviews were conducted with 40 people, many involved in actively shaping the town, through local politics, civil society and business. We also spoke to a range of other residents, both younger and older, to hear their views on local life. The text below represents a snapshot of opinions and perspectives shared during these interviews.

Corby is proud of its history of people working & standing together when things get tough.

From the efforts of its men and women in the steelworks in Operation PLUTO to fighting together against factory closure, people say that Corby is a place where people support each other.

“*So, there's a tremendous compassion, it's a key word for Corby. There's a tremendous compassion in Corby, and if people see you trying to do something for yourself, for your family, for the town, they will help.*”

[Woman, 50s].

Corby has had a difficult time over the years, with the steelworks closure and other redundancies - a time when residents describe the town was “left for dead”. But if you live in Corby you're used to the ups and downs of Corby. This has made many people feel resilient to changes, even when these changes are unwelcome.

“*When the steel work closed [Corby] got back on its feet again. It didn't just sit down and lie down and just take it. I think that's from the brave men and women that done all that. Who said, 'come on get up, let's do something'.*”

[Man, 70s].



The Corby Steelman statue.
Source: Academy of Urbanism,
David Kennedy 2017.

Many people we spoke to felt generosity & welcome are hallmarks

“*It is a friendly, genuine place and people don't have a lot but they will give what they can.*”

[Man, 40s].

Corby's Scottish heritage was often given as a reason for the welcoming nature of the people, as well as the close social relations in the town.

“*When they built the steelworks, they gave them all jobs. They basically did a drive up in Scotland, a jobs drive, and they all applied. A lot of them even walked the way down, they got there any way they could. Obviously a lot of the housing they built for the workers, and a lot of people just stayed. So we've all been raised on sort of like Scottish traditions things like that. Even here, I think that's why it's a big thing about everyone getting behind each other.*”

[Man, 20s].

Networks of mutual help and support are considered a key local asset, which have helped the town weather the difficulties it has faced.

“*You can't get a Corby person down. If you present them with a problem, they are going to find a way to get through that and probably won't be doing it by themselves. They'll probably know five different people that can help you with that problem. That is what a Corby person is. That's the pool, I suppose.*”

[Woman, 20s].

How residents see the town is sometimes at odds with outside perspectives.

Corby is a town that gets a few knocks in the media and many spoke about the town's bad reputation.

“*The town had a terrible reputation. If you'd say, 'Oh, I'm going to Corby', they would say things like, 'Oh, I wouldn't take your car, or... I'd get somebody to guard your car, or I wouldn't go after dark', and that drove me bonkers.*”

[Woman, 50s].

Residents often commented on the negative stereotypes they encounter from neighbouring towns.

“ *Wellingborough and Kettering, when I was younger, were a lot better than Corby. Or so my perception of it was, people from those towns saying, Corby’s a shithole and whatever...*”
[Woman, late teens].

These external perceptions matter. Some people see changing how Corby is viewed by others as key to the town’s success:

“ *There’s no reason we can’t be open to the same opportunities as any town. If you can change that perception that has been around for so long, you will break down all of the barriers that Corby faces. Perception is the biggest thing.*”
[Man, 50s].

While often cast by outsiders as a place of problems, residents described how, for many, Corby has been a place of opportunity. Many recount how the town had at one time provided better paid work, better quality housing, and security for their families.

“ *There’s a lot of people came from Glasgow, and they were living in tenement buildings, and moved into homes with gardens and they’ve gained meaningful employment a lot of the time and become established.*”
[Man, 50s].

Today, Corby is again attracting new residents who feel the town has something for them. Those we heard from were often drawn to the town because of the housing on offer. But they describe how in Corby they have found more than a roof over their heads.

“ *[My parents] told me ‘well there is this new house in Corby’ and it’s a nice quiet area, quiet neighbourhood, so we just moved. But when I moved I googled it and I learnt it was one of the poorest! I was shocked, this is a beautiful town, how can it be the poorest?’*”
[Woman, 20s].

“ *The day I moved here, I had nothing but people who were helpful, pleasant, polite, welcoming.*”
[Woman, 50s].

Recent developments and rapid growth are both a source of pride and concern.

People say the town centre renovations have been a real improvement, with new shops and the return of a cinema making Corby somewhere people from towns nearby want to visit.

“*When the Willow Place [shopping centre] got built, that was the thing that was the turning point, I think because even just having a Primark brings people here.*”

[Woman, late teens].

This is a source of pride for many, who often compared Corby’s renewal to the perceived decline of neighbouring towns. Indeed, many mark out Corby as distinct from its surroundings politically, socially and economically.

By and large the idea of housing growth has not faced the kind of opposition seen in many other parts of the country - many residents embrace the idea of a bigger Corby. But growth also generates concerns about the impact on services and infrastructure, like schools and healthcare.

“*I think that strategy is great bringing more people into the town, but we’re already struggling with appointments for doctors and schools placements - you’d need to implement some of the services and funding to put those in. The amount of houses going up and some of the new estates didn’t even have schools. It seems to be an afterthought.*”

[Woman, 40s].

While many describe Corby as a “migrant town”, there is concern that newer arrivals are made to feel less welcome.

“*[My friend] used to talk about when he came from Scotland, there were four families living in the same house supporting each other and you’d go off your night shift and share your bed with your brother, who was going on to the day shift and whatever. And that was like it being, oh, isn’t this so romantic? And isn’t that so good on what people did? Now the Eastern Europeans do it and, [people say] ‘oh, them bloody foreigners in that one house’.*”

[Man, 40s].



Corby East Midlands International Pool. Source: Academy of Urbanism, David Kennedy 2017.

We heard from some recent migrants who echoed these experiences of discrimination.

While the town is often said to be on a positive upswing, there are still challenges for many.

Changes to the town's economy over the years have affected many residents.

“*It's a steel town, people are quite tough. That's throughout many communities. A lot of communities have been devastated through economic neglect, and they still get there. There's just a lot of people struggling man, really genuinely struggling. That's the reality for some people, and that's sad.*”
[Man, 50s].

While there are more businesses, and manufacturing and distribution are strong, some of the jobs on offer aren't as valued as they were.

“*I think people generally like making things, if you're palletizing boxes off the back of a wagon, there's not satisfaction in that is there?*”
[Man, 50s].

Wages tend to be lower and some say that because they are often zero hour contracts, jobs do not offer the security they once did.

“*I think it's the low skilled, low paid. There's zero-hour contracts. Corby, it's all through agencies. There's a lot of zero-hour contracts. There's no stability in anything.*”
[Man, 30s].

We heard from residents who said the town had experienced many redundancies over the years as new businesses have come and gone.

The resilience of Corby's new economic base has also been questioned by some, who raise concerns about the potential impact of automation on the local economy.

Austerity has had an impact with funding cuts for services and charities. Cuts eat away at a sense of community, security and possibility. But they have also galvanised residents into action and campaigning. Many talked about the fight to save Corby's Urgent Care Centre and its importance to the town.

Corby is sometimes described as a town with the social challenges of a larger city - with issues of alcoholism, addiction and mental health higher than neighbouring places. And the valuable services and charities doing work around mental health and addiction

support, as well as helping create ambition and training for young people, could suffer more from budget cuts. People want to protect those things.

“*There’s a lot of organisations doing great work, but in terms of it thriving I don’t think so. There’s no statutory funding - that’s been said by the county council this week. To secure funding these days is really hard, because there’s not a lot out there. I know a lot of charities in Corby are struggling, how bad I don’t know.*”

[Woman, 40s].

The alternative story of Corby.

We spoke with many residents who are actively seeking to improve things, with arts and heritage schemes, new opportunities for young people, and other innovations. This “pro-Corby” lobby, as one resident described it, is working hard to make things better.

The growth in Corby’s population, in business, and its innovative spaces like Adrenaline Alley, suggest there are a lot of ideas and possibilities to work with. We were told about many radical projects and creative schemes started up by residents.

When asked what better story the media could tell about Corby than the one they currently do, people acknowledge the challenges but also point to other factors. They say that the people of Corby aren’t as judgemental as the media representation of the town:

“*The thing about Corby and Corby people is they take as they find.*”

[Woman, 50s].

Many feel there should be more of a focus on the town’s positive attributes: its warmth and welcome and generosity of spirit.

“*I think we should be known for welcoming people and being open.*”

[Man, 40s].

“*The volunteer culture in Corby is like I’ve never known anywhere else.*”

[Woman, 50s].

And its traditions and history of action among its citizens and agencies.

“*Corby is a deeds not words place. They don't sit there and talk about it, they do it*”

[Woman, 50s].

“*I think it's a town that's been good to people and people have been good to the town, so it's reciprocal, it's been a reciprocal relationship.*”

[Man, 50s].

So, if Corby was a person, who would it be?

“*It wouldn't be one, it would be a family*”

[Woman, 50s].

“*I think it would be a grandmother, because you know when you're at your granny's, she always had soup, or she would have a scone, there was always something there....The friendliness, receptiveness, probably forgiving, your granny would forgive you much easier than your mum*”

[Man, 50s].

“*They'd be a man. Because its strong. Quite masculine looking. Around 45... I think they're up for a good time, a good drink.*”

[Woman, late teens].

“*Right. I would have to make it male with big, broad shoulders because it's had to carry a lot. I would say that they're very friendly and approachable.*”

[Woman, 20s].

Our thoughts

Resilience is a quality that many associate with Corby and its people, who have achieved much in weathering the closure of the steelworks and rebuilding an economic base in the town. Where media narratives of industrial towns suggest inevitable decline and decay, Corby's experience challenges these ideas.

Our project has found that across Europe, industrial regions have fared better than their non-industrial counterparts during the recent economic crisis.

We have also found that both in England and further afield the fortunes of industrial towns vary significantly. Comparing the experience of Corby to that of neighbouring towns, as many residents do, illustrates the divergent experiences of places in close proximity. Corby's uptick is felt to be running counter to the experience of towns nearby.

Locally, pride is taken in its experience of defining its own path in the face of many challenges. Corby's journey highlights that towns are not just the passive subjects of wider economic and social trends. The actions of agencies and residents can make a real difference to their futures.

We look forward to learning about such people-led initiatives that have taken place in the town and exploring new ideas for the future as our project progresses.



Corby Mardi Gras 2017. Source: Made in Corby, Adam Balcomb, 2018.

About the research

The research was carried out by Social Life and the Young Foundation as part of a larger piece of work for the Bright Future project looking at how Corby and other similar towns can thrive in the future.

We are running three workshops in the winter of 2018-19. The first, in November, will look at the state of the town and understand its strengths and weaknesses. The second after Christmas will focus on what has helped Corby find solutions to problems in the past, and the final workshop will develop new ideas and innovations that help the town thrive in the future.

About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation aims to develop better connected and more sustainable communities across the UK. We are a multi-disciplinary team, bringing together research, investment, innovation and community development. Our programmes cover a range of themes including: place-based work, health and well-being, inequality and support for young people. For more information visit www.youngfoundation.org

About Social Life

Social Life is an independent research organisation that aims to put people at the heart of places. We work with local authorities, developers and local community groups in the UK and across the globe to find practical ways to build stronger communities. For more information visit www.social-life.co

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to all those who have offered their time and shared their perspectives for this research. We are very grateful for generous help we have received since we started our work in Corby.

