

Cittaslow UK

Findings and reflections

“Cittaslow is not a flower you wear in your buttonhole or a medal you pin to your jacket – Cittaslow is a different way of understanding, to design and implement policy.”

Paolo Saturnini. Speech at Cittaslow International Assembly, 2014

This document reflects upon the results of a research partnership between the Geography Department at Newcastle University¹ and the Board of Cittaslow UK, with the collaboration and support of many people local to its member towns. UK towns where membership of Cittaslow intersected with the research period are: Aylsham, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Diss, Llangollen, Mold and Perth.

As requested by the board, I have sought to provide a report that avoids using overly academic language, but gives an overview of the research process and some key findings relevant to Cittaslow UK.

The word ‘slow’ is capitalised throughout when referring to Slow philosophy and related concepts, but otherwise is in lower case. ‘Fast’ is in single inverted commas when it is used as a counterpoint to Slow (and to acknowledge that it is a problematic term).

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¹ The project was a Collaborative Doctoral Award funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Research was designed and carried out by Tessa Holland with academic supervision led by Helen Jarvis. The resulting doctoral thesis (2018) is titled

The story of the PhD

At the start of the PhD I did not know a lot about Cittaslow but had some familiarity with the broader movement through Slow Food, and through the idea of Slow design in creative practice. Getting to know Cittaslow UK began with reading, talking, attending board meetings and visiting introductory events like 'Cittaslow in the City' (London, 2012). Board members and the (then) Project Officer supported my introduction to the organisation by sharing archive documents and personal insights into the workings of the UK organisation.

In 2013 I visited all six member-towns to perform scoping studies, including Llangollen, which was still at the self-assessment stage. My aim was to start getting to know the organisation: its members, the towns, their residents, and the various understandings of Cittaslow – and for them to get to know me. I carried out telephone and face-to-face interviews with the Town Clerks (or equivalent) of all the member towns. In 2014 I attended the Cittaslow International Assembly in Holland, which provided insights into the workings of the international secretariat, and how the organisation is perceived beyond the UK.

The second stage of research involved identifying sites for more focussed case-studies. Board members from Mold and Berwick expressed interest in hosting these studies and I was happy to follow that lead. My approach was to go to the towns, read the local press, make observations, and talk to a variety of people (flowing from initial introductions through Cittaslow board members) to try and discern shifts in the local situation that were felt to be significant to local people. Possible themes were then cross-referenced for resonances with Slow philosophy and aspects of the original research proposal. Eventually the studies coalesced around a market-square refurbishment in Mold, and an endangered tradition of net-and-coble fishing on the Tweed.

In Mold and Berwick I used an ethnographic approach to draw out multiple understandings of these local issues from diverse townsfolk, institutional representatives and 'under-represented' population groups. Enquiries focussed on local people, but not necessarily those directly linked to Cittaslow. Some knew Cittaslow well, some may have come into contact with it incidentally and tangentially, but others were unconnected, or even unaware of it.

The third stage of the PhD turned to analysis, theorising and writing. The final part of that process is to provide this report to the Cittaslow UK board, which I hope will contribute scope for reflection and further conversations.

Cittaslow UK: its strengths and its challenges

During scoping studies perceptions were gathered from people who were currently, or had previously, been associated with Cittaslow and the Slow movement in some capacity. These studies revealed several strengths and virtues of Cittaslow UK, but also that it faces very particular obstacles.

Strengths

○ ***Generating a vision***

“Cittaslow shapes how the town council responds to every decision – it is a thread through everything.”

Town Clerk, Aylsham

Cittaslow membership sets a generous aspiration that incorporates principles of sustainable development and good living. Cittaslow goals are widely inclusive, providing a guiding framework to help its towns shape a vision for their futures. The goals encompass infrastructure and environmental policies, the enhancement of urban fabric, the awareness and promotion of local produce and products, and a heightened emphasis on hospitality, social cohesion and partnerships. When guided by these goals, Cittaslow towns can actively shift the local agenda.

○ ***Crossing boundaries and making connections***

“I don’t think people are still in their own little towers in the same way they used to be. It’s very difficult to know whether people realise that there’s much more to be gained from co-operation – that it’s not a threat – or whether it would have happened with time anyway. Who knows? It’s impossible to evaluate.”

Cittaslow UK Board Member, Berwick

The flexibility of Cittaslow’s agenda brings adaptability. It brings a capacity to draw together disparate parts of a town’s character and population: making links between groups that may not otherwise communicate, and joining-the-dots between details that would not otherwise be connected. Whether affiliated with town councils or not, Cittaslow membership brings a perspective that is non-partisan and not party-political. By being non-aligned, Cittaslow representatives can forge connections *between*, rather than drawing lines *around*, local group identities. However, as the quote above illustrates, this subtly powerful quality is not easily evaluated to measure ‘impact’.

○ ***Prioritising values***

“The key thing is, it doesn’t lecture people. It says: ‘Here are the issues, let’s do something about it, and have a good time doing it’. And you know yourself, those are the things you remember!”

Organic farmer and Cittaslow supporter, Perth

Cittaslow philosophy provides a value-based narrative within which towns can recognise themselves, and champion their own unique identities. The goals act as a prompt: encouraging the local agenda towards certain values that prioritise ‘direction of travel’ over seeking specific quantifiable outcomes.

- *Raising the town's profile*

“Well, space in Mold has been debated for quite some time, in fact it probably goes back to 2006 [when Mold joined Cittaslow]. In Mold there was never any doubt, it was always going to be Daniel Owen Square.”

(Re: awarding ERDF funding) County Council representative, Flintshire

In member towns Cittaslow commonly takes a lead in initiating events, festivals and local infrastructural initiatives that start conversations, improve local wellbeing, draw in visitors, and generate income for the local economy. As a result Cittaslow towns benefit from a raised profile within district and county councils, often leading to favourable consideration for funding applications, or their selection to pilot regional schemes – and bringing the attached potential to influence policy makers.

Challenges

- *Maintaining the vision*

“Cittaslow is personality driven – always personality driven.”

Town Council Administration Officer, Aylsham

The particular structures and processes of UK local government make it difficult for Cittaslow to sustain a continuity of vision within town councils. The constant churn of shifting local councillors combined with the short tenure of mayors means that maintaining continuity often relies on the good will of a few committed individuals. These may be councillors or council employees – but in all cases the good will of the Town Clerk is crucial. If these key individuals disappear, move on, or lose faith in the vision, then Cittaslow struggles to hold its ground. In towns where Cittaslow groups exist outside of town council patronage it still falls on key individuals to generate and maintain a vision. However, without established internal structures and administrative support, projects are totally reliant on volunteers... and they can get volunteer fatigue.

- *Communicating the meaning of Cittaslow*

“When somebody says to me: ‘What is Cittaslow?’ then you can’t say, ‘Well it’s a big long list of objectives.’ Well, you can, but then they glaze over (...)

If you were to try and tot up the numbers of individuals in this town that actually engaged in Cittaslow activity, I’d be surprised if more than 10% knew about it, I’d think that less than 5% were positively engaged, and probably less than 1% were activists.”

Town Centre Manager, Mold

Board members and Cittaslow representatives frequently cited the challenge of translating what Cittaslow is into simple clear language for local residents and councillors. Its broad agenda and philosophical nature mean many find its identity intangible, and even when there is a support within local authority institutions, it is not unusual for Cittaslow to remain

little known and/or poorly understood amongst the general population. In part this arises from the perceived intangibility of its role and identity, which is hard to convey in simple 'soundbite' terms.

- *Pressure to measure*

“The UK gets hung up on measuring: league tables, facts, figures, impacts – and people tend to think locally not nationally”

Cittaslow application lead, Perth and Kinross

Within a broad climate of austerity it is easy to feel pressure to constantly quantify Cittaslow's worth – particularly in financial terms. The drive to justify everything in instrumental, impact-based measurements could be termed as 'fast' pressure. However a Slow philosophical ethic to improve human quality of life and sustainability cannot be counted in simple quantifiable economic metrics. The Slow and subtly embedded nature of Cittaslow activities make a powerful contribution to shaping local agendas – but not in the form of discrete linear processes – making it hard to attribute due credit to Cittaslow in producing outcomes. So, even when real-world improvements result from applying Cittaslow values, the connection can remain below the radar from a public perspective, and the perception of its value within town councils can fade, thus requiring Cittaslow representatives to constantly argue its worth.

- *Operating with limited resources*

“You go on the website and there's not a great deal of resource on there: things like (...) survey forms, types of forms you could use to engage with your community, how do you do a reassessment of your scoring? There needs to be some resource there to assist maintaining your status and keeping going forward.”

Town Clerk, Llangollen

Limited time, money, administrative support and technical expertise constrain Cittaslow UK's ability to proactively promote its agenda. Unlike in other European contexts, the UK model of local government does not easily allow for dedicated funding and staff. Consequently the ability of Cittaslow UK to meet the needs of its members is compromised across a range of areas that include: maintaining links to provide mutual support within the UK network, updating and monitoring self-accreditation audits, applying for funding, maintaining websites/social media platforms, and travelling to national or international meetings.

- *A perception of 'foreignness'*

“The term Cittaslow – given that we're not particularly a nation of linguists – we have all manner of pronunciations of it. You don't even know what language it's in (...) and it has not necessarily positive connotations, because of the 'slow' element.”

Regeneration Projects Team leader, Perth and Kinross

Cittaslow is a curious portmanteau word, half Italian and half English, open to multiple pronunciations, and not self-evident in its meaning. This can introduce a sense that the whole concept is ‘foreign’ to the local contexts it seeks to champion. In countries like the UK, US and Australia, where English is the native tongue, there is an added risk that the very word ‘slow’ can also mean backwards, dim or unexciting – subverting the intended meanings of sustainable and enduring. These issues make Cittaslow subtly vulnerable to misinterpretation, and need to be challenged head-on.

Cittaslow philosophy in the research

“Nel software del mondo c’è la nostra storia...”

“In the software of the world is our (hi)story, there lie our knowledges.

The software of the world is as important as the water that we drink, as the air that we breathe. We cannot allow ourselves to lose it.”

Paolo Saturnini, speech at Cittaslow International Assembly, 2014

Speaking as the retiring President of Cittaslow International, Paolo Saturnini highlighted the crucial significance within Cittaslow philosophy of embracing intangibles. He spoke of cultures, values, traditions, stories – and in particular *knowledges* – as ‘the software of the world’. Preserving and enhancing these very human elements of its member towns (and the wider world) is central to Cittaslow philosophy and purpose.

In designing my research I sought to blend concerns raised by Cittaslow UK representatives with core elements of Slow philosophy. This meant paying proper attention to local skills, crafts and economies: valuing the uniqueness of place, and thinking about the importance of looking to the future by building on the strengths of the past. I drew out two terms from the vocabulary of Slow that are not in common English usage, but they are central to defining Cittaslow’s priorities, and link Slow philosophy back to classical roots.

Autochthony comes from the Greek and literally means ‘sprung from the soil’ (as the Athenians claimed to have done). It implies something that belongs, that has formed in its present position, has grown from the land, and is somehow ‘natural’ to the place. It is used to describe the specificity of local traditions, culture, produce, architecture, cuisine and so forth.

Conviviality comes from the Latin and literally means ‘living together’ (as in Rome’s foundation myth, which describes offering asylum to all comers). In the Slow Food movement small locally-formed committees are known as ‘convivia’ and the word convivial is used to invoke the sense of communal celebration and enjoyment of the senses that is part of the Slow ethos. It invokes skills of bringing diverse peoples together, finding how to be welcoming, how to accommodate difference, and how to live well alongside each other.

These ideas informed the choice of two case studies. Both focussed on manifestations of 'local knowledge' that had made significant contributions to identity, sense of place, and economy in their towns. The street-market in Mold, and net-fishing on the Tweed were traditional livelihoods with a long history in the places they evolved. They relied on knowledge 'held in common' within their unique cultures, allowing practitioners to navigate the complex environments within which they operated. Their Slowly accumulated and locally calibrated practices function in a constantly changing present – a quality that allowed these local institutions to sustainably persist and adapt as part of their local economies for hundreds of years.

In Berwick the saying is that the nets 'have aye been' – that is: they have always been there. Except now they are not. The fact that Slow, sustainable local livelihoods endure and adapt over centuries, makes it easy to take their continued existence for granted. However, their longevity disguises a hidden vulnerability. In both cases these Slow livelihoods were shown to be vulnerable to a 'fast' way of seeing that did not value the sophisticated *knowledge systems* that allowed them to function. Rather than being seen as something precious and worthy of support, they risked being characterised as self-serving and self-sufficient by local decision-makers.

“The netsmen weren't really interested [in sustainability]. All they were interested in was killing fish.”

Clerk to the River Tweed Commission

“When you listen to traders (...) what they are looking for is to make money (...) That's the reason why they come. It's not out of loyalty to Mold.”

Town Centre Manager

The characterisation of net-fishers as only interested in killing fish and market-traders as only interested in making money led to interpretations that dismissed the subtlety of their respective expertise – and allowed regulatory decisions to be made that disrupted the crucial seasonal and practical rhythms of their livelihoods. In a 'fast' world, Slow and crafted livelihoods need to be noticed and protected. They can all too easily disappear when their rhythms and practices are disturbed.

Navigating a course between Slow and 'fast'

“Cittaslow is a compass. It is our compass.

Cittaslow is a compass, not to turn back time, but to move forward and grow in a consciously sustainable way

(...)

Cittaslow is a compass to, together, find a way out of a global crisis, knowing we will not come out with the approaches and policies of the past, but with new ideas and new projects, creating or reviving many small chains of production that are strongly rooted in the local.

Cittaslow is a compass to navigate the local with a clear head that serves a global vision.

Cittaslow is this and much more as well.”

Paolo Saturnini, speech at Cittaslow International Assembly, 2014

In his speech, Paolo Saturnini suggested that Cittaslow acts as a compass, helping member towns to navigate a course through shifting terrain: to set priorities, and to establish a direction of travel. It takes particular skill to read the local landscape for clues as to what is Slow and sustainable in a fast-changing world. Slow prioritises human and convivial qualities. It values a sense of place, and cultural manifestations that are adapted to the particular locality in which they have evolved - they needn't be ancient, but they must be calibrated or crafted to fit local context. 'Fast' ways of seeing the world prioritise economic metrics, linear progressions towards fixed goals, counting things, box-ticking, branding exercises, technological fixes and overly generalised ways of interpreting specific local conditions.

There are concerns within Cittaslow UK about explicitly using the terms 'fast' and 'slow'. The legitimate worry is that Slow might be seen as somehow inefficient or dull by comparison with 'fast'. But could this anxiety be tackled by taking ownership of what the terms mean for Cittaslow? After all, Slow is what makes Cittaslow distinct from other small town sustainability initiatives (such as Transition Towns or Fair Trade Towns) so it is a shame to discard its trump card. Not everything about 'fast' is negative, so I'm not suggesting black and white distinctions – just that it is important to be able to distinguish when or if the local agenda is being skewed by 'fast' pressures.

The pressure to conform to such dominant ideas can lead decision-makers to lose sight of more locally specific, human-scale aspects of town life: something that Cittaslow is well placed to challenge... but can also fall victim to, as the following contributor indicated:

“Cittaslow has not been used as a driver; it's just been ticking boxes. In meetings everyone is reporting back, not moving forward (...) I see it as a brand or badge, not a mechanism. There were no objectives, no plans for the next years – but the money was still paid out.”

Member of Cittaslow Steering Committee, Perth

But, as Saturnini also underlined, Cittaslow is not a badge, it should be seen as a different way to understand and implement policy.

Field research in Mold and Berwick showed the importance of having processes that can recognise Slow knowledge systems, represent the interests of their practitioners, and champion the provision of a supportive regulatory environment – a function that Cittaslow is ideally suited to fulfil. In those contexts the local Cittaslow groups recognised that the identified communities were important to their towns' local identities, heritage and economies. However, they had not seen the issue in terms of 'knowledges'. I suggest that by shifting focus onto identifying and supporting local knowledges and livelihoods, it could

help Cittaslow groups in their often-mentioned struggle to ‘translate’ Cittaslow into something that is meaningful to local people. By looking for and championing sustainable knowledges and practices, Cittaslow becomes a direction-finder not to resist ‘fast’, but to identify and protect what is Slow and sustainable.

The importance of building a narrative

The way Cittaslow is talked about is central to its sustainability. Research in Diss showed that even measurable impacts do not persist in the local memory if work is not done to create a positive and enduring narrative. Diss is the UK town with the strongest evidence that joining Cittaslow brought measurable benefits, in the shape of a £146,000 European LEADER+ grant. Nevertheless, just before my visit, the question of whether Cittaslow was worth its membership fee had been raised in the town council, and there had been a public meeting to debate whether the council should continue to fund it for an eighth year. The Deputy Mayor told me what happened. The meeting was inundated by people who had experienced positive effects from Cittaslow membership, and they spoke up for the value and benefits it had brought to the town:

“The big council debate drew out all the supporters and all the evidence of what had been done. No one knew it had all happened. Everyone was: ‘W.T.F.?!’ It was like ‘What have the Romans ever done for us?’² Not that Cittaslow had done nothing – but that they [the councillors] didn’t know about it.”

Deputy Mayor, Diss

Representatives from all Cittaslow towns have cited this problem: even if there are tangible benefits, it is hard to hold them down, attribute them to Cittaslow’s influence, and sustain the connection. In Diss the continuity of vision was lost in the successive turnover of town councillors looking for measurable impact indicators. Findings suggest that when Cittaslow is interpreted as a mechanism for instigating specific discrete actions in order to attain predicted outcomes, or for merely counting activities that can fall under its umbrella, then the vision cannot be sustained. However, when the influence of Cittaslow qualitatively impacts local residents, then the memory stays with them.

The Deputy Mayor in Diss had recently retired from the armed forces, and he borrowed an interesting descriptor:

“It’s what we call in the military a ‘force multiplier’ – it adds more than it costs, but what it adds is intangible. Cittaslow is a force multiplier.”

² Reference to the Monty Python film, *Life of Brian*:

“All right, but – apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh-water system, and public health – what have the Romans ever done for us?”

A force multiplier is any tool that can increase the effect of an action (such as a hammer, or a lever) allowing more to be done for the same amount of effort. In a military context it describes operational aspects that improve effectiveness without increasing cost or hardware. Variables that do not lend themselves to quantification (such as leadership, morale, training, reputation and connections) become reframed as critical tangible forces that expand what is feasible and produce synergistic effects. The emphasis falls on creativity, adaptability and improvisation to look for long-term solutions rather than settling for short-term gains.

How Cittaslow is understood, both within local government and amongst town residents is central to its sustainability. Research showed that if its goals are to influence local policy, then councillors and key decision-makers must maintain some nuanced engagement with the organisation and its values. However, amongst townsfolk, a detailed comprehension of its goals and mechanics need not dominate – and more significant than a high public profile, is a positive one. Findings further suggest that (as one Dutch Mayor observed) it is actively counterproductive to couch Cittaslow's worth in measuring discrete steps and actions, because they invite benchmarked judgements.

“You can be very strict or you can be very gentle. Cittaslow is not goal-based, but direction-based. If you are strict it doesn't work. The process is more important than the goal. If it became goal-based people would... [here he held up his hands and pushed against the air, to indicate that people would resist it].”

Mayor of Borger-Odoorn, Netherlands

During scoping studies in Aylsham, I wandered into a butchers shop on the high street. There was a flyer for a local event pinned to the wall, bearing the Cittaslow logo, so I asked the butcher about Cittaslow. He responded positively, and offered to explain:

“Cittaslow is the name of an Italian village. They started a protest against multi-nationals coming in, because all high streets look the same now. It started here about five years ago when Tesco came in, but unfortunately they couldn't stop it.”

What is intriguing about this telling is that it successfully identifies several core elements of Cittaslow's message, yet is inaccurate in almost every detail. It is true that it started in Italy, and that the movement aims to modify the economic dominance of multi-national companies that create the effect of 'clone towns' on small high-streets. However Cittaslow is not the name of a village, Aylsham had not been a member for five years, but nine, and the reason it joined was not related to the coming of Tesco. The narrative had been transformed (humanised and personalised) into a story about a single village, where a battle took place to keep its unique character and to support small independent businesses, such as this butcher's shop. To that particular local resident Cittaslow was seen as positive and useful, suggesting the message may not be quite so intangible after all – as long as there is free rein to make it locally meaningful.

Concluding thoughts

Whilst Cittaslow faces particular challenges to its survival in a UK context, it nevertheless has potential to make a real difference in its member-towns, and to reach the parts that other small town initiatives don't.

Cittaslow is not goal-based, but direction-based. Paolo Saturnini advocates that Cittaslow be used as a compass – to chart a course between 'fast' and Slow. Cittaslow struggles to sustain itself in towns where its value becomes reduced to seeking 'fast' benchmarked justifications of its worth. Research findings suggest that if the pressure to define Cittaslow as something measurable and specific is removed, and if a clear connection to local issues and livelihoods can be made, then the Slow message becomes self-evident. Embrace the intangibles rather than worrying about them – that is where the force multipliers lie. Cittaslow becomes more tangible when it champions local interests: developing narratives built around convivial practices and autochthonous knowledges – focussing on 'the software of the world'.

Cittaslow's strengths lie in its ability to be a direction-finder – an agenda-setter – and in its ability to see things differently. By looking through a Slow lens (or putting on and peering through Slow Specs) superficial boundaries and divisions become blurred... and what is revealed are many connections and commonalities that may otherwise lie hidden.

I would like to extend my profound gratitude to the Board of Cittaslow UK for the support and openness you have displayed in enabling this project. The research was made possible by the generosity of spirit of all Cittaslow representatives and local town residents who gave their hospitality, their time and their thoughts willingly. Thank you.