

**Huntly Town
Strategy**

**Aberdeenshire
Towns
Partnership**

Final report

**Executive
Summary**

September 2005

**GEN Consulting/
Douglas Wheeler Associates**

Executive Summary

1. Background

The GEN Consulting/ Douglas Wheeler Associates (Gen/DWA) team was commissioned in February 2005 to develop an integrated and holistic town strategy for Huntly.

The key objectives of the strategy, as set out in the brief are to:

- develop an agreed strategic vision for Huntly that re-establishes the town as a vibrant rural service centre and which:
 - is based on a detailed understanding of the town
 - fosters community engagement and involvement
- formulate a holistic long-term strategy that fully addresses the town's foreseeable needs in social, cultural, environmental and economic term
- prepare a five-year action plan to help deliver the strategy
- identify appropriate community led and supported mechanisms for delivering and implementing the strategy.

The full report includes:

- a review of the policy context within which the Strategy will sit
- an appraisal of the town and its sphere of influence
- a review of the economic and social performance of the town
- an assessment of the key challenges facing Huntly
- a town regeneration strategy and action plan
- preferred implementation arrangements

This Executive Summary focuses on the economic and social review, the assessment of key challenges facing the town, the regeneration strategy and action plan and the implementation arrangements.

2. How well does Huntly Perform

2.1 Economic and Social Review

The consultants carried out a review of a series of economic and social indicators in Huntly arranged around five key themes.

- population
- the local company base and employment profile
- school leavers and exam results
- housing and land availability
- health inequalities.

Population

- Huntly's population has grown slowly over the last ten years, and at a slower rate than Aberdeenshire
- the town has a high number of older residents
- the town's population is expected to continue to fall

Company base

- the number of businesses in Huntly has fallen over the last four years
- like the rest of Scotland, Huntly is a town of small businesses...
- .. but Huntly has different types of businesses than elsewhere in Aberdeenshire and Scotland

Employment profile

- the number of jobs in Huntly has fallen over the last four years.
- women account for a smaller proportion of the workforce in Huntly than in the rest of Scotland
- the public sector is the largest employer in the town, although retail and hospitality and manufacturing are also important employers

School leavers and exam results

- the Gordon Schools performs strongly both in terms of exam results and students staying on beyond S4
- a high proportion of school leavers from Huntly progress on to Higher Education

Housing and land availability

- there have been a significant number of new houses built in Huntly over the last 10 years, although the rate of growth has been much slower than in other settlements close to Aberdeen such as Ellon and Inverurie
- levels of Industrial and Commercial development on the town have historically been low

Health inequalities

- a higher proportion of the town's population under the age of 65 was claiming attendance allowance than throughout Aberdeenshire.
- a lower percentage of the local population in Huntly East were claiming disability Living Allowance (DLA) than throughout Aberdeenshire
- estimated smokers and the level of deaths attributable to smoking was a significant health issue for the town.
- in Huntly in 2001, 20% of the population suffered from a long-term limiting illness, compared with 15% in Aberdeenshire and 20% in Scotland as a whole.

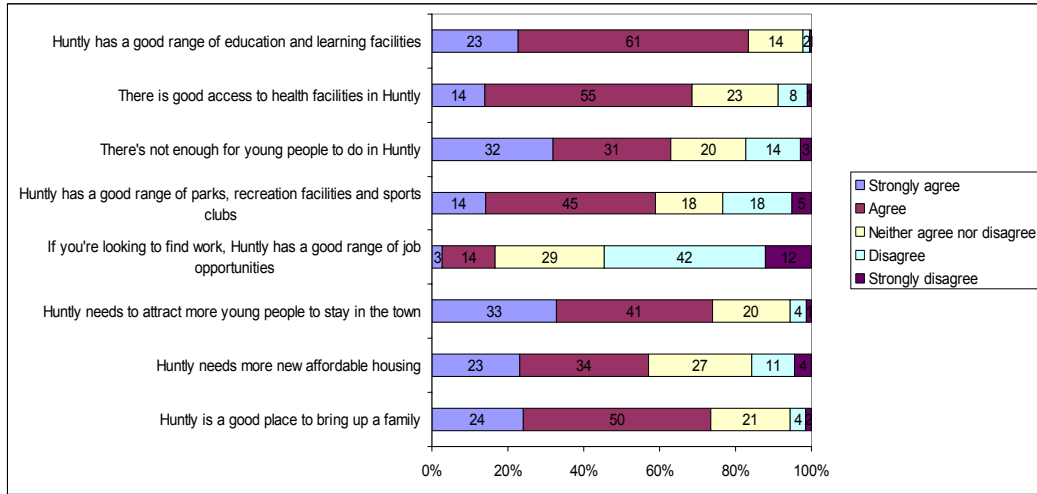
2.2 Huntly community questionnaire

The consultants also developed a community questionnaire focussing on five main sets of issues including views on:

- the town as a place to live and work
- the town as a place to visit
- the town centre of Huntly
- looking after the town
- the key issues facing Huntly.

In total more than **400 responses** were received and analysed. The key messages from the survey are highlighted below.

Huntly as a place to live and work



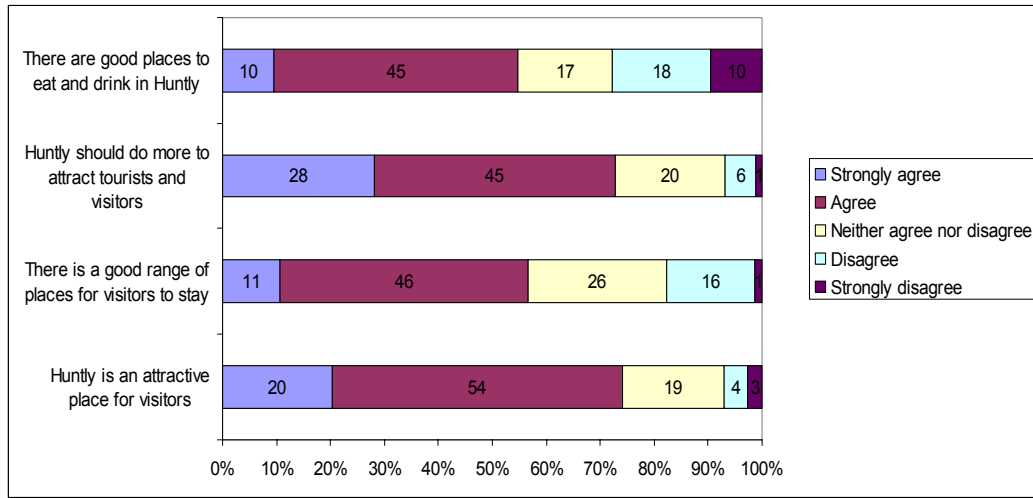
The survey produced a number of positive messages with a large majority of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that Huntly:

- has good range of education and learning activities (84%)
- has good access to health facilities (69%)
- has good range of parks, recreation facilities and sports clubs (59%)
- is a good place to bring up a family (74%)

The survey also highlighted some areas where the town could improve its performance:

- 53% agreed or strongly agreed that there is not enough for young people to do in Huntly
- 56% of people disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that Huntly offers a good range of employment opportunities
- 74% agreed or strongly agreed that more should be done to retain young people in Huntly
- 57% agreed or strongly agreed that Huntly needs more new affordable housing

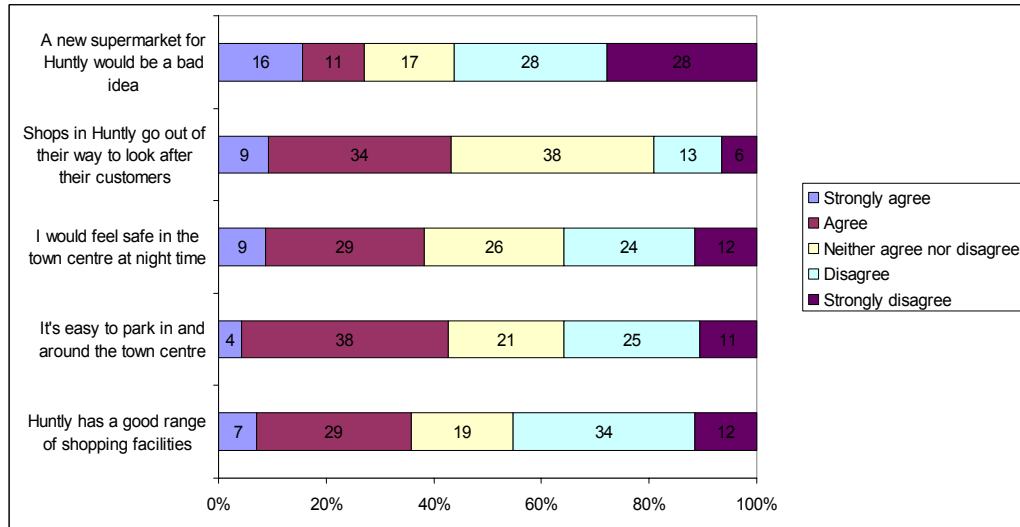
Huntly as a place to visit



The key messages are that:

- almost three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Huntly was an attractive place to visit but a similar proportion believed that more should be done to attract visitors (74%)
- the town was perceived by a large proportion of residents as offering a good range of places for visitors to stay (57%) and good places to eat and drink (54%).

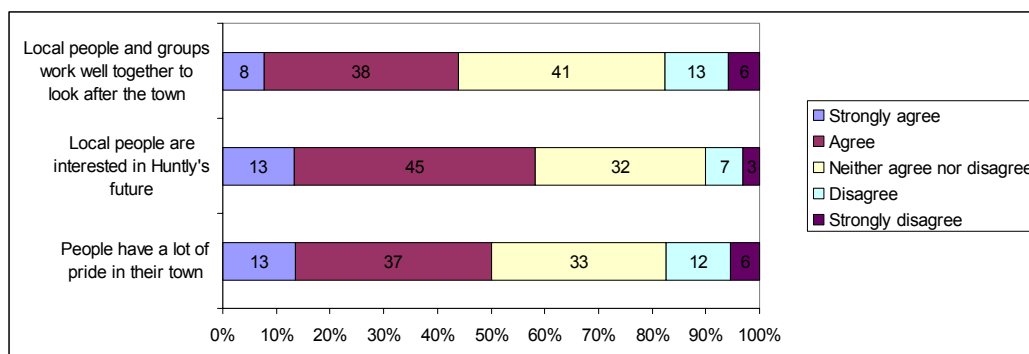
Huntly town centre



The survey provided some mixed views on Huntly Town Centre:

- in terms of the shopping facilities on offer in Huntly, views were mixed with 36% stating that the town centre had a good range of shops with 45% disagreeing with this statement
- 44% of people agreed that shops in Huntly went out of their way to look after customers, although around a fifth disagreed or strongly disagreed
- views on the ease of parking within the town centre were also mixed with 43% of residents stating that it was easy to park there, and 36% stating that it was not
- opinion on the safety of the town centre at night were balanced, with 38% stating they would feel safe at night and 36% disagreeing with this statement
- the survey also highlighted that the majority of Huntly residents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the opening of a new supermarket in Huntly would be bad for the town.

Looking after Huntly



The key messages from the survey were that:

- there was a strong sense that local people took pride in Huntly with 50% agreeing that people have a lot of pride in their town
- 58% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that local people were interested in the future of Huntly.
- 46% felt that local groups worked well together in looking after the town although 20% disagreed with that statement.

The key issues facing Huntly

Individuals surveyed were also invited to offer their views on the top three issues facing the town. The survey confirmed that:

- the top priority for respondents was to create more job opportunities in the town
- minimising the effects of a new supermarket and retaining the health of the town centre were both rated as equal second priorities
- improving leisure and recreation facilities and ensuring the availability of more affordable housing were both relatively high priorities with total scores in excess of 300
- conversely creating high quality facilities for tourists, improving education and training opportunities and supporting community groups were seen as *relatively* low priorities, but each was still important to a significant number of people with around 30 giving each issue a top ranking.

3 Huntly: challenges and towards a vision

3.1 Huntly - Strengths & Weaknesses

At the first community workshop held on April 14th and attended by almost 60 people participants were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Huntly and to help identify what a vision for Huntly in 2020 might be.

Key Strengths

The workshops identified a series of clear strengths that Huntly should seek to maintain and build upon:

- for a town of its size the Huntly has an impressive number of large businesses, a number of which have an international reputation.
- at the same time Huntly remains a town of small businesses, with a diverse range of companies.
- the town also has a good location with road and rail links, and a reasonable public transport service
- the town is well served by the presence of a Business Centre offering start up and expansion space for new businesses, located next door to a Learning Centre, which provides access to a wide range of learning opportunities through Banff and Buchan College.
- Huntly offers a terrific quality of life, particularly for people bringing up a family and the Gordon Schools and Gordon Primary School both have

an excellent reputation, and there are a wide range of social, leisure and sporting activities available to local people.

- the town itself was also seen as a key asset to be exploited in the strategy, and is compact, has distinctive buildings and an attractive town square.
- there is a good range of facilities for visitors including a wide range of accommodation and a number of visitor attractions

Weaknesses and opportunities

At the same time the workshops noted a number of weaknesses (and opportunities) that the strategy might seek to address:

- changing environment for businesses, especially those facing increased international competition, highlighted by the recent relocation of manufacturing at RB Farquhar
- while there are a number of well paid high quality jobs in the town, many people still have to commute outwith Huntly to work
- the town centre and the range of local shops were seen as key Huntly assets; however it was recognised that both of these faced threats from the proposals to build a new supermarket (or supermarkets) in the town.
- concerns were expressed about the range of housing available in the town. A shortage of housing might make it more difficult to attract people to the town, or retain existing Huntly residents.
- while the town has a good range of visitor attractions, there was a strong sense that more could be done to market the town to visitors.
- there was also concern that while the town is attractive there was a need to focus on the ongoing maintenance and stewardship of the town
- the workshops raised issues about the extent to which local people pulled together to support the town.
- overall, the view was that more had to be done to 'talk up' the town and to enthuse residents and business.
- Huntly needs to move from being a more cynical and critical town where '60/40 are against new ideas', to being a more positive outward looking town where '80/20 are for positive change'.

4. Town development strategy and action plan

4.1 Vision for Huntly in 2020:

The vision for Huntly in 2020 agreed at the second workshop in May was one where...

'Huntly is a growing, thriving, well-connected and managed market town that retains its individuality. Huntly will have a dynamic, diverse and user-friendly town centre that has kept its distinctive local character and is the heart of the town and wider rural community.'

The high quality of life, inclusive sense of pride in the town, the positive and committed business community and strong local culture in Huntly means that people want to live, work and visit now and in the future.

Huntly is a town where residents, businesses and agencies all pull together.'

4.2 Town development strategy

The consultants developed a strategy and action plan for Huntly based around six key themes.

- promoting business development and growth
- promoting Huntly's image and marketing
- improving the environment and encouraging visitors
- investing in quality buildings, sustainable sites and infrastructure
- encouraging skills and learning
- promoting sports, art and culture

Theme 1: Promoting business development and growth

Key Objective

To support local businesses, large and small, to continue to grow within Huntly and respond effectively to economic challenges. The aim will be to help ensure a business base that can continue to provide a wide range of good quality local jobs for the town.

Projects

Project	Next Step	Cost (over three years)	Lead Agencies	Priority
1. Huntly Business initiative	Identify target companies Membership campaign Attending Initiative meetings	Staff resource 3hrs per week	Town Co-ordinator / Aberdeenshire Council	High
2. Business web-site content - events and activity	(Plan activity programme) Develop website content Sponsorship of events / production of promotional material	£6k	Huntly Business Association	Medium / High
3. Working with larger companies / Determined to Succeed	Engaging with larger companies using Determined to Succeed to promote local career options	£15k	Huntly Town Co-ordinator /Aberdeenshire Council	Medium
4. Local sourcing	Engage with procurement staff to assess scale of opportunity. Carry out feasibility work to assess appropriate areas for targeting	£10k	Aberdeenshire Council / Local Businesses	Low/Med
5. Business needs survey	Carry out survey of emerging business needs and wished of local companies	£7k	ATP	High
6. Promoting e-business	Promoting use of e-business through demonstration centre and encouraging company use and adoption	£0k	SE Grampian	Med

Theme 2: Promoting Huntly’s Image & Marketing

Key Objective

To coordinate the marketing of Huntly and the town centre to residents and to visitors as part of a day trip and short break destination.

Projects

Project	Next Step	Cost (over three years)	Lead Agencies	Priority
1. Town centre leaflet (s)	Agree principles and format with steering group, draft a brief and invite local design companies to prepare costed proposals	£4k	Town Co-ordinator with Huntly Business Association	Medium
2. Town centre web site linked to community web	Agree principles and format with local businesses, draft a brief and invites local web design companies to prepare costed proposals	£4k	Town Co-ordinator with Huntly Business Association	Medium
3. Shop local & welcome pack	Agree principle with local businesses and aim to launch a scheme by late 2006 with town ‘welcomers’	£2k	Town Co-ordinator with Huntly Business Association	Medium
4. Review the Huntly Brand	Undertake a through review of the ‘Huntly brand’ by an independent specialist, review the advantages/ disadvantages, identify a preferred ‘brand’ with the appropriate graphics/imagery that can be adopted in signs, leaflets, websites , local businesses and agencies	Brief to be prepared and costed	Town co-ordinator/ ATP/Aberdeenshire Council/ Huntly Business Association/VisitScotland	High

Theme 3: Improving the environment and encouraging visitors

Key Objective

To create a high quality clean and safe environment focussed particularly on the Square as a lively and attractive public place so as to increase the number of visitors to the town and improve the town centre visitor offer so that it meets and exceeds expectations.

Projects

Project	Next Step	Cost (over three years)	Lead Agencies	Priority
1. Stewardship & maintenance of the town centre	Agree a targeted programme of regular maintenance to establish and maintenance of high standards	Included in existing budgets	Aberdeenshire Council	High
2. Quality window displays	Agree principles, approach retailers and agree a pilot for Xmas 2005	£5k	Huntly Community Council / Huntly Business Association	High
3. Economic development opportunities from the local environment	Audit to identify projects in Huntly that can improve the local and global environment. Business plan to be prepared.	£6k	Town co-ordinator using a summer school with Forestry Commission & wind farm operator contributions	Medium
4. Landmark lighting	Agree a brief with input from Aberdeenshire Council technical officers and invite costed proposals from specialists to include capital funding. Aim for a demonstration projects by autumn 2006	£7k to cover proposal	Town Co-ordinator	Low/Medium
5. Signage & interpretation	Research, design and implement a Huntly town trail	£20k	Town Co-ordinator/ ATP/Aberdeenshire Council	High
6. Authentic holidays	Approach businesses and organisations to establish support for the principle. Draft a short business plan. Aim to promote a demonstration project in summer 2006	£4k	Town Co-ordinator/Visit Scotland	High

Theme 4: Investing in Quality Buildings & Sustainable Sites & Infrastructure

Key Objective

To promote investment in high quality residential, business, community and leisure development on key sites in Huntly to offer an attractive choice of property with good infrastructure that contributes to the townscape and makes Huntly a more competitive place.

Projects

Project	Next Step	Cost (over three years)	Lead Agencies	Priority
1. Development Framework & Design Statements	<p>Agree key sites for the future development of the town and prepare an overall development framework. Design statements to be prepared at the appropriate time. Sites could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Land east of Piriesmill Cottages ➤ Deveron Road ➤ West Park Street/Former BT Site ➤ Potential Town Centre Living Opportunities 	£8k	Aberdeenshire Council Planning	Medium
2. Review traffic management proposals	Initiate a review of the traffic management proposals that are emerging for the town centre to ensure business and residents view are taken on	£0	Aberdeenshire Council Transportation & Infrastructure	Medium

Theme 5: Encouraging skills and learning

Key Objective

To ensure that Huntly residents have the opportunity to enhance their skills and access well paid locally based employment opportunities, particularly those which meet local skills needs.

Projects

Project	Next Step	Cost (over three years)	Lead Agencies	Priority
1. Virtual business and learning centre	Keep abreast of progress with the Virtual Business and Learning Centre Project	£0	Aberdeenshire Council	Medium
2. Hospitality welcome programme	Assess demand for training Develop additional Huntly history and attractions elements Delivery	£10k	Visit Scotland / Huntly Business Association	Medium
3. Traditional building skills training programme	Assess demand and explore principles with Scottish Traditional Skills Training Centre	£8k	Scottish Traditional Skills Training Centre	High

Theme 6: Promoting Sports, Health, Arts & Culture

Key Objective

To use sports, the arts, culture and the heritage of Huntly to generate even more civic pride among residents and make the town an attractive day trip destination for discerning visitors. Overall the objective is also to further improve the health and well being of Huntly residents

Projects

Project	Next Step	Cost (over three years)	Lead Agencies	Priority
1. Community directory	Agree principles, format and possibilities for a web based tool that can be easily updated. Invite costed proposals from local web design companies.	£7k	Marr Area Partnership using local IT/web design company	High
2. Health & well being initiative	NHS Grampian to take the lead in establishing the Huntly health and well being initiative	£5k initially	NHS Grampian	Medium
3. Venues: improvement & promotion	Convene meeting with hoteliers/publican/licensees and others to assess interest	£5k	Town Co-ordinator / Huntly Business Association	Medium
4. Town marquee	Research need for and identify options for establishing a town marquee or other facility for young people in the town	£5k	Community Councils / Youth Groups / Town Co-ordinator	Medium
5. Events programme	Develop a three year programme of arts, culture and sports events with business and community support	£40k	Community Councils / Huntly Business Association/Town Co-ordinator	High
6. Exploiting Huntly's sporting strengths	Promote an initiative to further exploit Huntly's sporting strengths with short, medium and long term proposals	Capital cost to be identified	Aberdeenshire Council Education and Recreation and school sports coordinator	High

5 Implementation and next steps

5.1 Delivery of the Action Plan

Experience elsewhere highlights that irrespective of the delivery structure adopted an action driven full time Project Coordinator. The Huntly Town Coordinator was appointed in May and will become the clear focus for ensuring that public and private sector partners carry forward agreed actions and be responsible for progressing actions where no individual partner has primary responsibility.

A Town Project Champion who is well known and respected should also be identified. The Town Champion's primary role will be to advocate and promote the wider benefits of the Huntly Strategy and Action Plan and continue to build support among public and private sector partners.

As a result a simple two-tier delivery structure is recommended in Huntly based on the Town Coordinator reporting to a decision making/accountable body underpinned with a formal Huntly Strategic Partnership. It will be essential to ensure that the new partnership has enough independence and 'clout' to be effective.

5.2 Huntly Strategic Partnership

The key partners namely Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeenshire Towns Partnership, Marr Area Partnership, businesses and community representatives and the key members of the Steering Group would adopt a formal partnership agreement. The partnership agreement would:

- commit all parties to the principles of the Huntly Strategy and Action Plan
- establish a partnership board serviced by the Town Coordinator with a base in Huntly town centre
- co-opt appropriate members to ensure effective and meaningful business, local community and youth involvement
- identify a town project champion
- undertake detailed development planning and programming
- establish and monitor key performance indicators including retail and housing investment, local training, employment, social regeneration, green environment and sustainability standards
- prepare annual Business Plans
- be reviewed after three years.

5.3 Huntly Town Coordinator

Maintaining an appropriate separation between the Partnership and Executive functions will be important to ensure accountability. The following functions are envisaged as being the responsibility of the Town Coordinator:

- lead, manage and co-ordinate investment in Huntly within the Strategy and Action Plan
- work with the Town champion to promote the Huntly Strategy and Action Plan among public, private, voluntary and community partners and ensure that investment priorities are aligned
- refine and deliver an agreed agenda based on the vision, strategic themes and action plan that is set out chapters 6
- develop funding packages and secure funding for other economic development, social and environmental improvements
- build capacity and promote continued participation from businesses and residents in Huntly
- report to the Huntly Strategic Partnership as the policy focussed, decision making accountable body.
- work with local agencies, businesses and the community to help ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of Huntly.