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A Vulnerability Index of Scottish towns

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Introduction: This Research Briefing reports the key findings of exploratory research which uses a 'Vulnerability Index' (VI) to calculate the vulnerability of 44 Scottish towns to economic downturn associated with public sector spending cuts². Recent research has highlighted that there is a dependence on public sector jobs in many small towns (particularly in remote locations)³, therefore it might be expected that they are especially vulnerable to public sector spending cuts.

Key Findings

- The map shows the vulnerability of the 44 towns. It is possible to draw out some general patterns, but care should be taken in drawing conclusions regarding the relative ranking of the selected towns vis-a-vis one another, and indeed vis-a-vis other towns in Scotland⁴.
- There is a 'cluster' of towns with poor vulnerability rankings in the south, and particularly the south west, including Campbeltown, Girvan, Dunoon, Stranraer, Dumfries, Cumnock and Hawick. In the south east, Eyemouth and Hawick are vulnerable.
- Brechin, Kirriemuir and Blairgowrie, which are all located close to the city of Dundee, are also vulnerable. In earlier analysis by the Rural Policy Centre, Dundee City was the most vulnerable Scottish local authority⁵, suggesting a possible relationship between the vulnerability of these towns and their closest urban area. Dingwall, Tain and Buckie also demonstrate high vulnerability.
- There are several less vulnerable towns in central and north east Scotland, including Callander, Crieff, Pitlochry, Banchory, Aviemore and Alford.
- Some island towns demonstrate relatively low vulnerability (including Stromness, Kirkwall and Lerwick), while others are more vulnerable, including Stornoway and other small settlements in the Western Isles.

Policy Implications

- The analysis highlights that the vulnerability of towns varies, even within local authority areas. This variation must be recognised through flexible, locally-tailored policy responses. As public sector cuts continue, the impacts on Scotland's towns should be monitored.
- It has been argued that insufficient policy attention is paid to towns in Scotland⁶. This research suggests that a nation-wide policy framework may be required containing a menu of policy and funding measures from which individual towns could select the most appropriate for their situation.

¹ Researcher, Rural Policy Centre. The Vulnerability Index (VI) was devised and calculated by Dan Bates of the Rural Services Network (<http://www.rsnonline.org.uk/>) and Ivan Annibal of Rose Regeneration. (<http://www.roseregeneration.co.uk/>). The Index is based on four indicators: the proportions of the local population of working age, claiming Job Seekers Allowance and working in the public sector, and a measure of income deprivation devised from the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

² The 44 towns are in local authorities which are defined as rural according to the Randall definition (where an authority with a population density of less than one person per hectare is defined as rural).

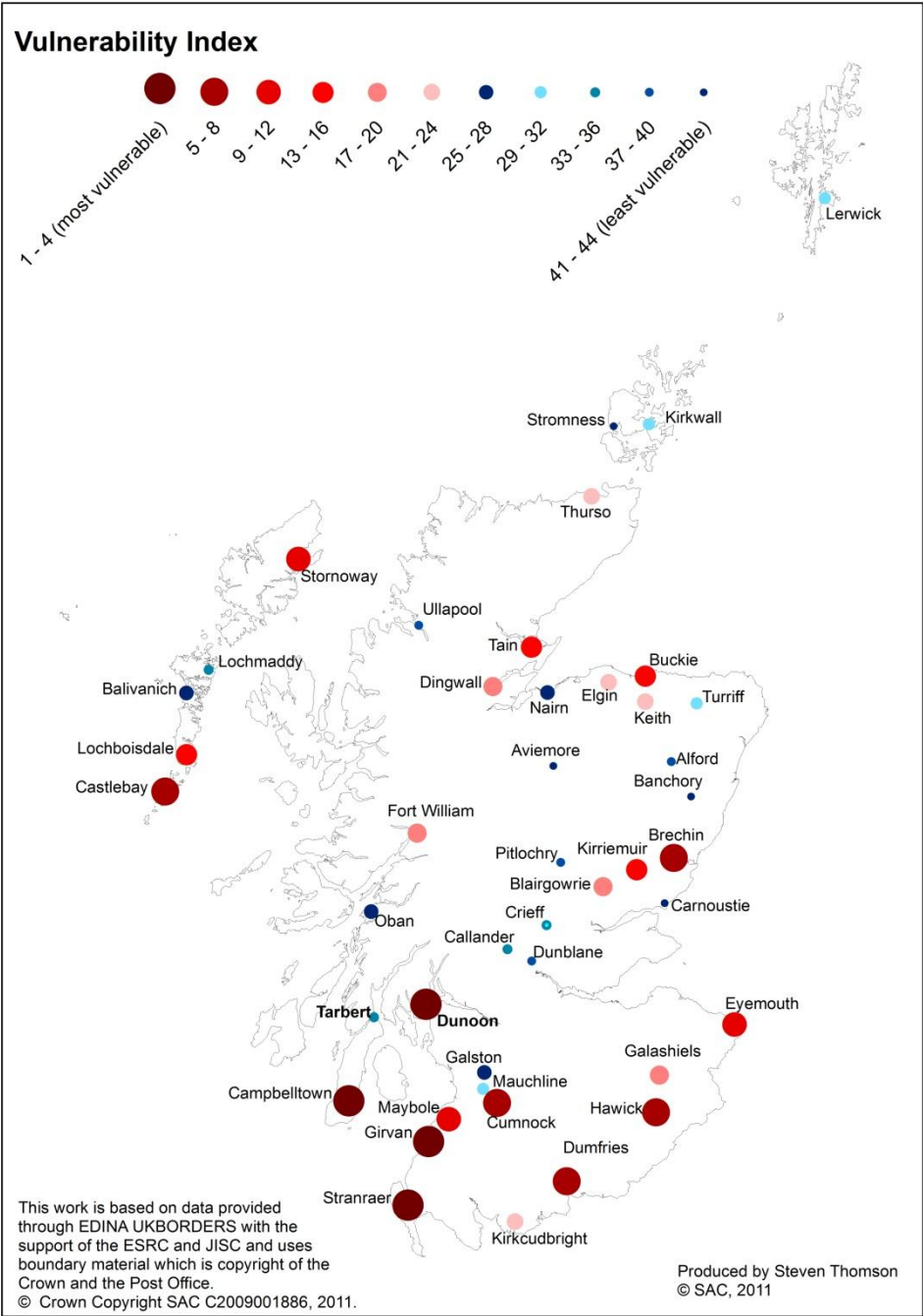
³ See for example, Scottish Borders Council, COSLA and South of Scotland Alliance (2007) *Scottish Small Towns Report 2007-2013*. Available online at: <http://www.scotborders.gov.uk/pdf/18015.pdf>.

⁴ The towns were not selected to be representative of all towns in rural Scotland. Rather, they were chosen to provide an appropriate geographical spread across the 14 rural local authority areas, to cover a wide variety of population sizes and to represent towns which provide at least a basic service function for a surrounding rural area. Note that towns are included that are both smaller and larger than the 3,000-10,000 population size used to define towns in the Scottish Government's urban-rural classification.

⁵ See <http://www.sac.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre/publs/thrivingcommunitiespublications/changingpublicbudgets/>.

⁶ Lindley, I. (2009) *Scotland's Small Towns... Still Breathing... But for How Long?* Available online at: <http://www.scotborders.gov.uk/pdf/30127.pdf>. See also the *Scottish Small Towns Report 2007-2013* (footnote 3).

Further work: Further analysis will be undertaken over the coming months using the VI, with the findings to be reported in the next 'Rural Scotland in Focus' report, which will be published in Spring 2012⁷. This will include work on: the relative importance of the four indicators that make up the VI in explaining the vulnerability of different towns; the differences in vulnerability of towns in remote and accessible locations and of towns which perform different functions in relation to their hinterland and to nearby city regions (e.g. agricultural or commuting towns); the relationships between the vulnerability of small towns and their local authority areas; developing the policy implications of the research.



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⁷ The first Rural Scotland in Focus report was published in February 2010 and is available online at: <http://www.sac.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre/publs/thrivingcommunitiespublications/rsif/>.