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The Important Role of Rural Hub Towns: The Penrith Case Study

The National Rural Conference 2025

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Rural Hub Towns

- 182 rural Hub Towns have been identified and classified, in 145 Local Authority Districts.
- In 2014 DEFRA identified the critical role of these ‘Hub Towns’ within rural economies: towns that were essentially rural yet had a population between 10,000 and 30,000, and which...



“play very important roles as ‘hubs’ in the rural areas around them (rural hinterland) in terms of providing services, employment and businesses.”

Value in Complex Systems

Our research agenda



- **Phase I (2011 - 12)**
- Collaborative Innovation studied in 11 multinational organisations
- **Phase II (2012 - 015)**
- Business models & performance in three strategic alliances
- **Phase III (2015 - 17)**
- In-depth study of SBC, its open innovation practices, and the journey of its tenants



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Value in Complex Systems

Our research agenda

Phase IV (2017 - 2019)

- 24-month study of Cabinet Office Open Innovation Team.
- Continue to advise senior officials into 2025.



Phase V (2019 - 2021)

- Innovation ecosystems and community regeneration - theory and practical examples (3 cases)
- Penrith study with detailed fieldwork (circa 100 interviews + workshops etc) looking at understanding Rural Hub Towns



Ecosystems perspective

A recap from ecology....

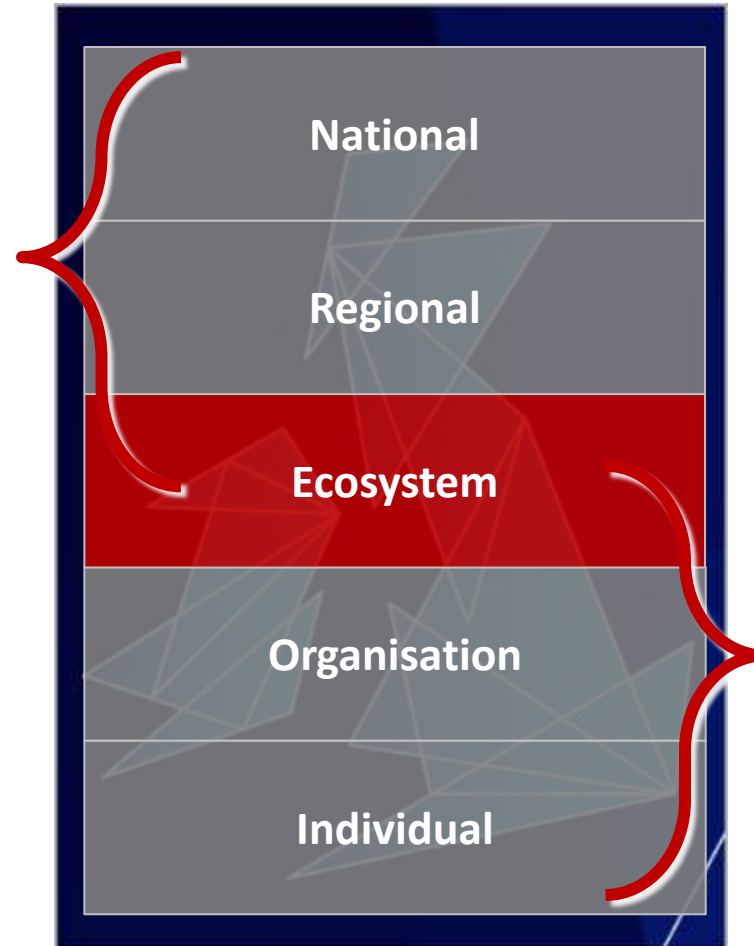
- Multiple direct and indirect links
- Energy cycles and recycles through the system
- Shared fate



Ecosystems perspective

Macro-economic identification of system drivers:

- Policy
- Economy
- Societal change
-



Place-based issues and management practices:

- Issue / Context
- Industry
- Locality

Unpacking processes:

what works and why

But more research for rural ecosystems is needed

Keystones & trophic cascades



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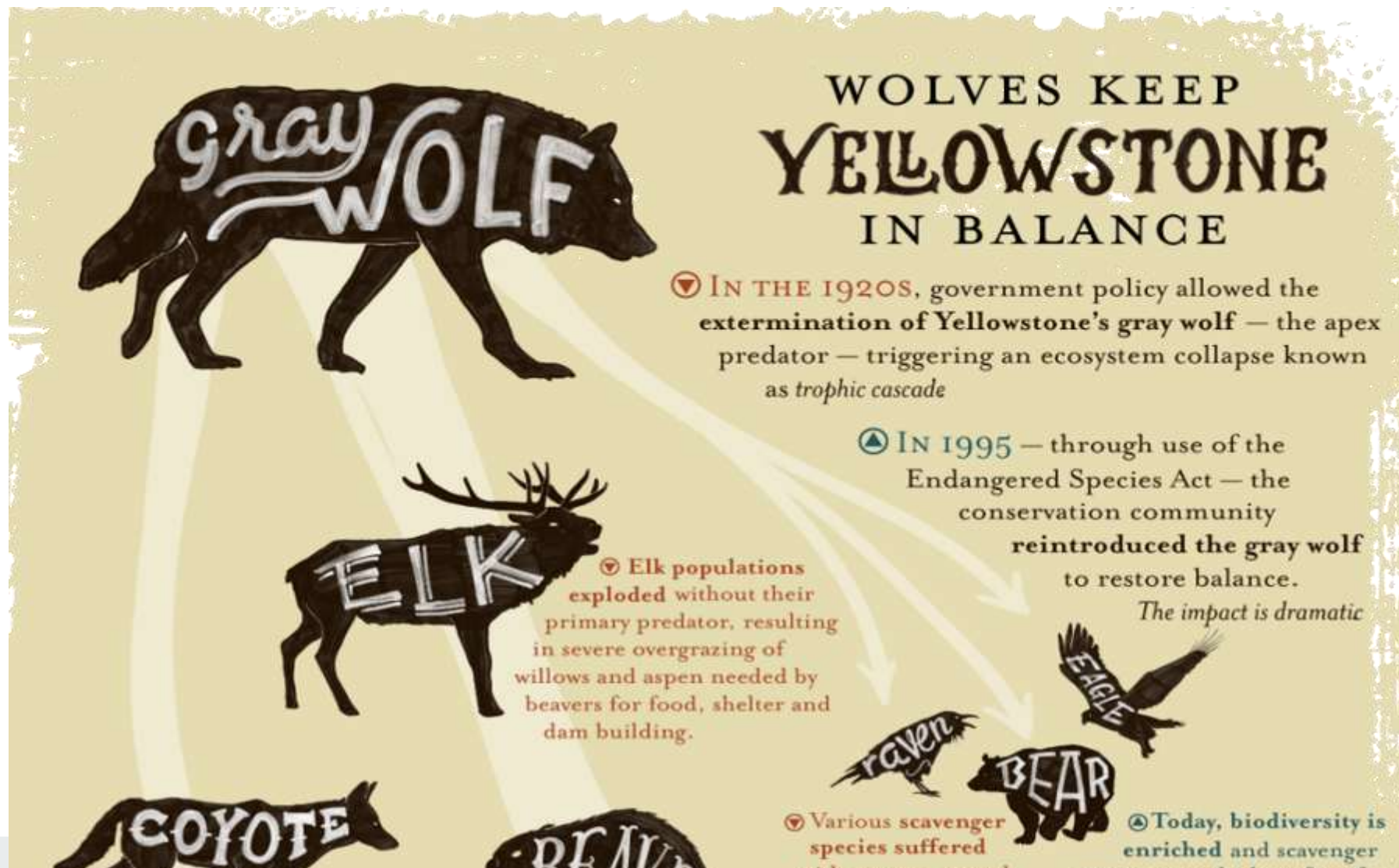


- Robert Paine, ground breaking ecologist, has died at the age of 83. ...Thorough careful experimentation, Dr. Paine made a profound discovery—not all species in an ecosystem are created equal.
- Some species exert undue influence in an ecosystem, while other species have little impact.
- **He dubbed these movers and shakers “keystone species,” and ecology has never been the same since.**

June 2016

<https://daily.jstor.org/how-the-keystone-species-concept-transformed-ecology/>

Keystones & trophic cascades



WOLVES KEEP YELLOWSTONE IN BALANCE



Ⓜ IN THE 1920S, government policy allowed the extermination of Yellowstone's gray wolf — the apex predator — triggering an ecosystem collapse known as trophic cascade

Ⓜ IN 1995 — through use of the Endangered Species Act — the conservation community reintroduced the gray wolf to restore balance.

The impact is dramatic

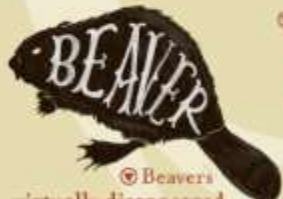


Ⓜ Elk populations exploded without their primary predator, resulting in severe overgrazing of willows and aspen needed by beavers for food, shelter and dam building.



Ⓜ Various scavenger species suffered without year-round wolf kills to feed on.

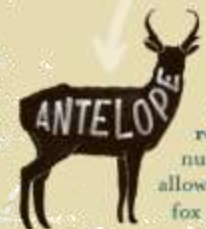
Ⓜ Today, biodiversity is enriched and scavenger species reap the benefits of regular, wolf-supplied meals.



Ⓜ Beavers virtually disappeared in the northern range. Dams disintegrated, turning marshy ponds into streams. Massive loss of mature willows and aspens. Heavy stream erosion. Many plant and animal species were affected.



Ⓜ After wolf reintroduction in the northern range, elk numbers drop and beaver colonies increase from 1 to 12. Insects, songbirds, fish, and amphibians thrive.



Ⓜ As the wolf returns, coyote numbers drop by half, allowing antelope, rodent and fox populations to increase.

SOURCES: OSU Trophic Cascade Program, NW NRDC, Predator Defense, "The Wolf's Tooth"
DESIGN: esomads.com

TESCO



Sainsbury's



What cascades matter to you? Can you predict?

Evaluating the town centre *role* through ecosystems (2019)



Environment

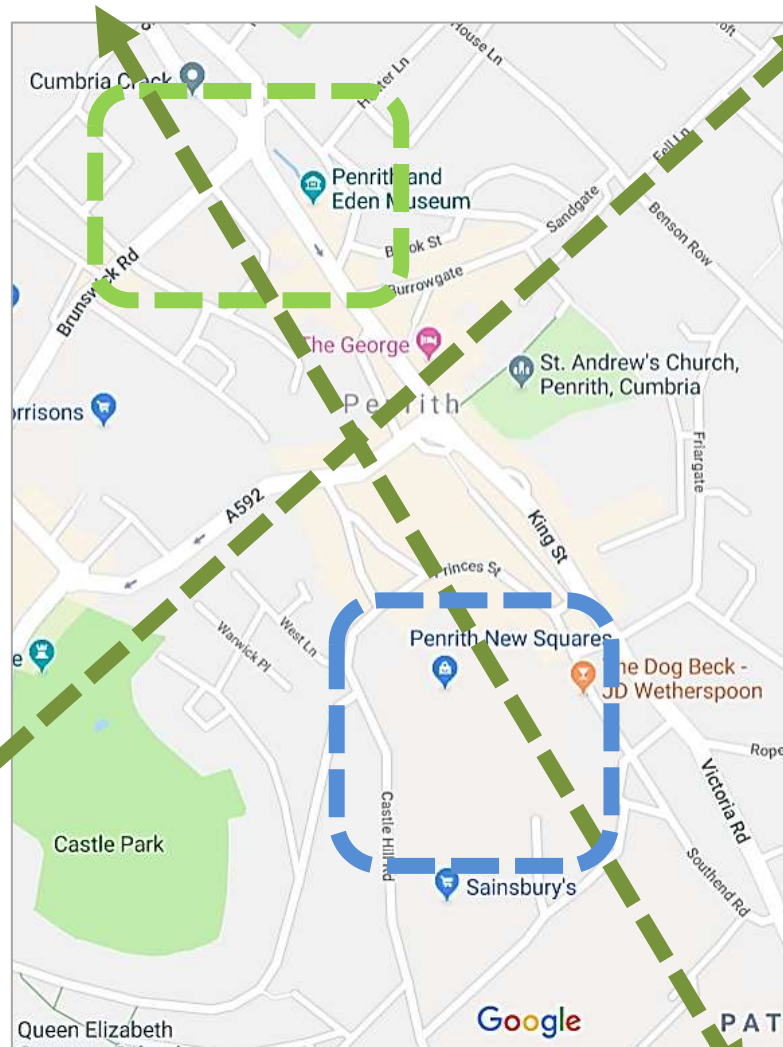
Economy

Culture

Health

- 1) *What is the Vision for each of these?
Do they connect up?*
- 2) *What's the 5-20 year strategy to
achieve these?*
- 3) *Can we set objectives / targets
against all of these – that link to
each other in a meaningful way?*
- 4) *What kind of leadership or
management do we need, to
deliver this kind of joined up
performance management?*

Evaluating the town centre *role* through ecosystems (2019)



Culture:

- Centre for performing arts on the site of old Argos – practice & performance.
- Summer and Christmas events programme for town centre.

Economy:

- Business & Innovation Hub in New Squares, with repurposing of units.
- Visitors centre & dedicated attempt to attract tourism, incl. coaches.

Environment:

- Create green routes out of town.
- Explore different options for the centre.
- New relationship with The Beacon.

Health:

- Identify how these initiatives connect to and support community health and wellbeing initiatives.
- Explore service co-location, and possible ways to use these new facilities.

Systemic action (2025)

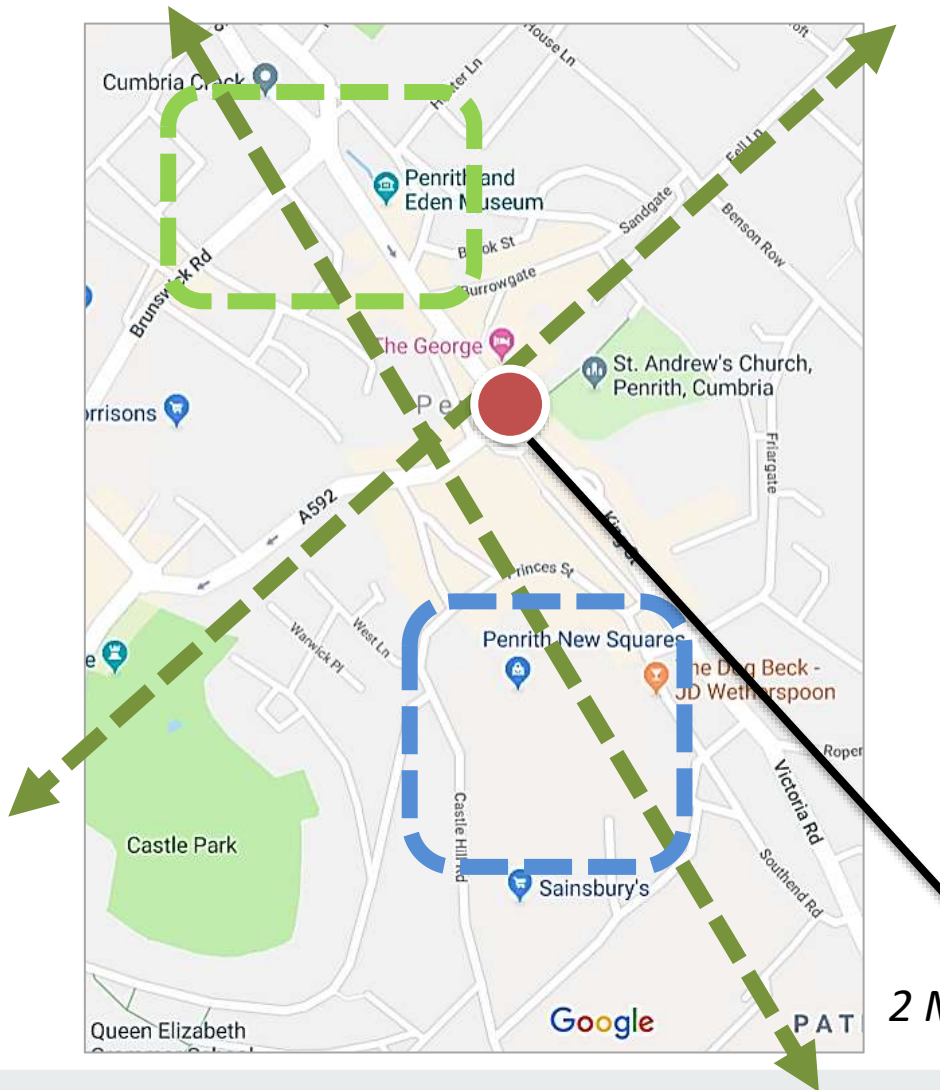
Keystone 1: Enterprise Hub



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Collaboration key to success of bid

IN March, 2024, the Herald ran a front page article which two Penrith-based experts shared their thoughts on the future of the town centre — including the idea of a flagship innovation centre.

2 Market Square (formerly Barclays Bank) a major presence in the town centre

Systemic action (2025)

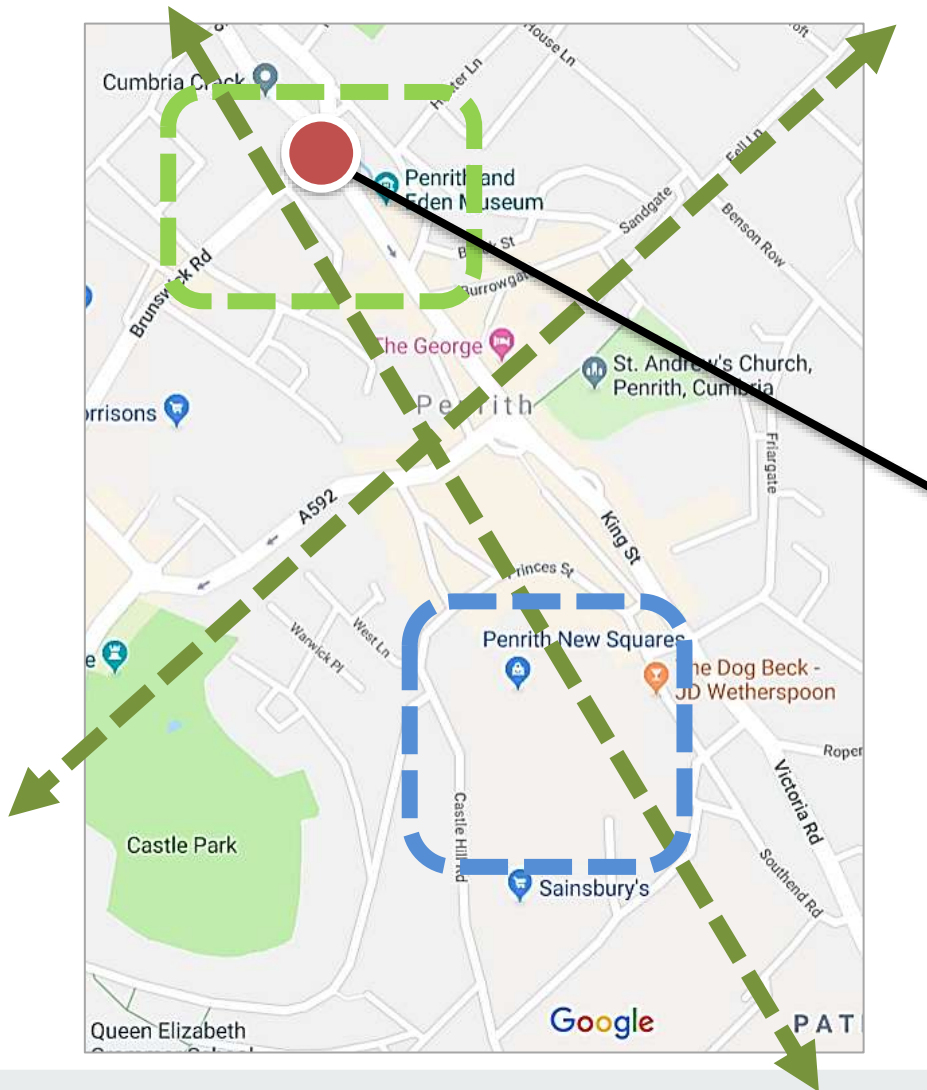
Keystone 2: Arts Hub



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Wellness through community connection & nature access



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- Our next steps require much **broader coalition of voices** and experts.
- We need to understand the implications for health and wellbeing of changing **routine patterns of movement and behaviour.**



Community connection

Keystone 3: Roller World (2028)



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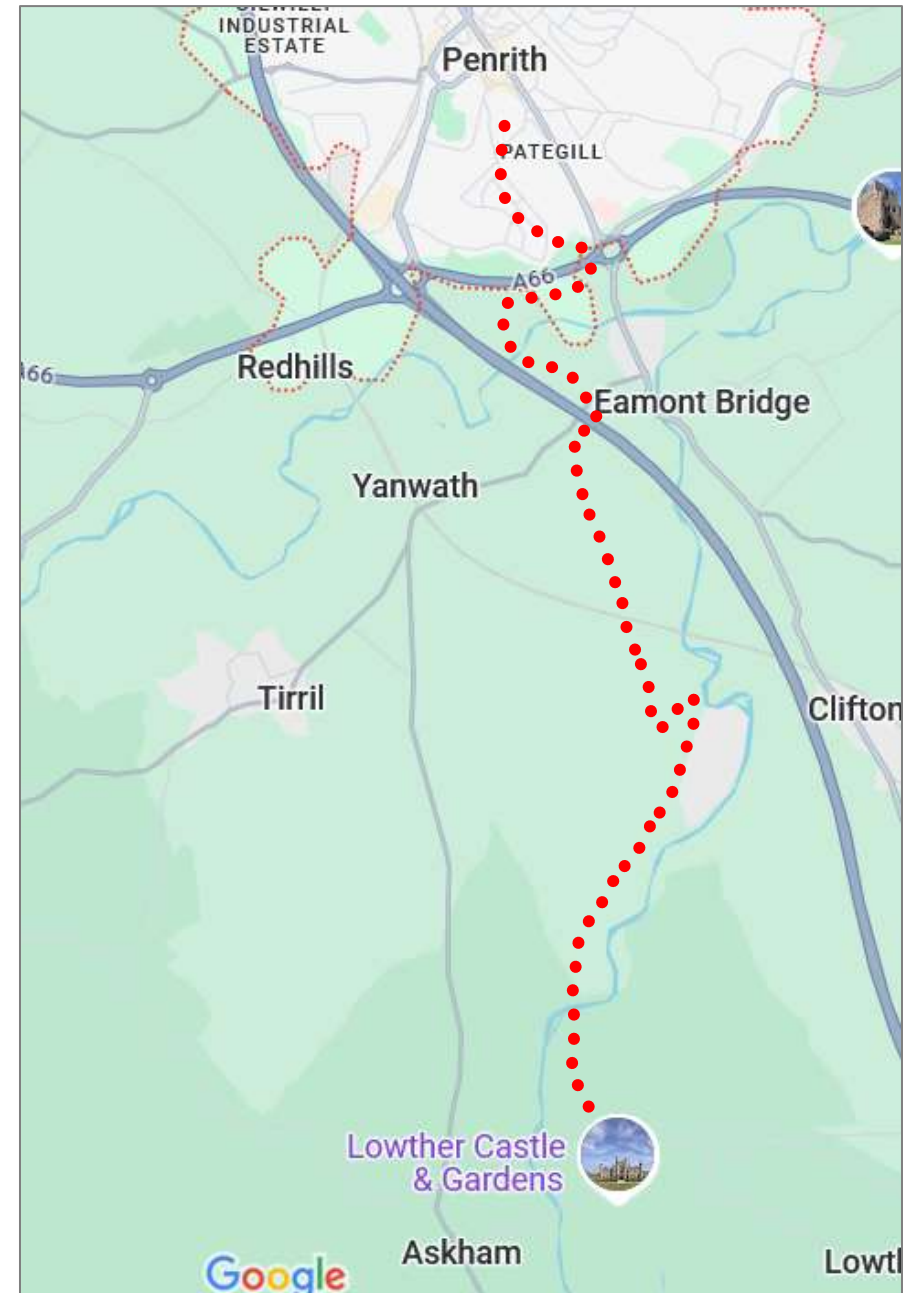


*A keystone feature in the town centre that **drives tourism**, boosts **daytime and evening footfall in town**, provides a hub for **community activity**, and long term **wellbeing for young people and families**.*

Nature access

Keystone 4: Green links (2030)

- **We need to make it easier to get out of** our towns by bicycle, for both local people, and visitors. Local consultation showed strong demand for these “green corridors”.
- **This is part of a much bigger vision for six National Park Gateway Towns.** The LDNPA needs to become a key stakeholder in technology-led green transport strategies, to tackle its own traffic problems, but also as its responsibility for regional regeneration.





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Wellness through community connection & nature access

- Our next steps require much broader coalition of voices and experts.
- We need to understand the implications for health and wellbeing of changing routine patterns of movement and behaviour.
- This is a **key role for health professionals** - the reimagination of the healthy rural town of the future.



*Thank you for listening,
any questions?*