

## Imagining Alternative High Street Futures

The purpose of the session was to provide an open forum for discussion on the possible futures for Scottish High Streets, to inform the town centre action plan of The Scottish Regeneration Strategy, and Scotland's Towns Partnership work.

### Context

The event was convened on the back of three sets of contexts: the **Mary Portas Review**, the research evaluation of the **Town Centres Regeneration Fund (TCRF)** in Scotland and the exhibition by **A+DS** on the High Street.

The Portas Review takes a fairly wide ranging look at how the service of the town centre experience is created and managed. It calls for changes in bureaucracy, service improvement and integrated responses at town centre level.

The review of the TCRF in Scotland introduces the need for thinking around theories of change: how do you change the idea of the High Street, how do you make it work?

The A+DS exhibition catalogues the development of the High Street, its issues and hints possible futures.

On this basis the summit focused on 'what to do' and 'where to focus' questions of town centre futures.

### Pecha Kucha presentations [Watch Video](#)

The session began with a short introduction from Chair for the day Ross Martin of CSPP followed by 4 X 5 minute Pecha Kucha provocations from 4 presenters to stimulate debate. The provocations were:

#### 1. Retail futures: Prof. Leigh Sparks

*"Town centres have a future, but it is different to how we remember them in the past"*

**Issue:** We are clinging to a vision of the High Street of past which is outdated; if indeed it ever existed at all. Our modern lifestyles are decentralised and fragmented, and this is unlikely to change.

**Future Scenario:** The future is local, we need to celebrate differences and localness and recognise that town centres have to shrink to allow this to happen. We need to reimagine and rediscover the social aspects of retail and shopping in our town centres and, aside from the retail, we need to create places with multiple uses that can 'stimulate, encourage and delight'.

#### 2. Streets as social spaces: Julian Dobson

*"We must recognise that we are not at the beginning of a decline, we are at the beginning of the end"*

**Issue:** Currently 50% of all retail space is out of town and over the next 3 years 50% of leases are up for renewal which will mean further retreat from the town centre.

**Future Scenario:** Julian suggested 20 alternative uses for the town centre which focused on social qualities and making use of local skills and resources to encourage creativity and

learning. He also suggested that the town centre should be re-established as a forum for discussion and public interaction.

#### 3. Theory of Change: Doug Wheeler

**Issue:** Doug discussed some of the recent research undertaken with the Scottish Government on Town Centre Regeneration and the TCRF which asked how Town Centre Regeneration works and what it can achieve. He also touched on the concept of Theory of Change (TOC) to make the case for using TOC to tighten up the loose language that is used to describe the regeneration of town centres.

**Future Scenario:** The key thoughts for provocation were:

- Town centres need their own distinctiveness, a typology - and this cannot be generalised.
- A town needs a proper vision and action plan driven by a facilitator/agitator - how are we going to find/train/support these people?
- We need to do more to support Small/Medium sized businesses whether this is through a 'Shop Doctor' or 1-to-1 consultations.
- The TOC is an excellent tool to improve project planning/health checks.

#### 4. Public Space: Diarmaid Lawlor

*"The public realm is not about pavements and lighting".*

**Issue:** We are suffering a catastrophic failure on what the public realm actually means.

**Future Scenario:** The solution is less about retail but depends on whether we can reconstitute and use new/existing cultural artifacts and people assets - to develop 'a platform for distinctiveness'. Diarmaid referenced Ann Markusen's report *Creative Placemaking* which states 3 key moves to give people the best chance of health and wellbeing - the need to: get local and get beyond the bureaucracy; to nurture and develop initiators/agitators; and to develop meaningful partnerships. To recover a sense of public realm, Diarmaid highlighted the need for participation 'being honest and really listening to what people want'; to create a 'bridge' from those who hold the resources to the people who need them; and the need for solutions to be pragmatic, authentic and plausible.

**"Lets think differently about resources. Imagine if we delivered our capital programme for schools on the High Street. The street becomes the school."**

## Workshop sessions

The objective of the workshop was to script an alternative story for what the High Street might be to inform the scoping of the action plan element of the Scottish Government Regeneration Strategy. The group workshops were split into 3 short sessions. The questions posed to the groups for each session and a summary of their responses are presented below:

### What can Scotland learn from the recommendations of the Portas review?

- In response to Town teams: What is the team trying to do? Have we got the right people? What model do we have that is driving the team?: We need a model that allows cooperation, collaboration and is not just commercial, and one which is right for growing the team and selecting the right team members. Above all the team should have whole community support and a clear set of goals.
- The Portas review suggested a number of good solutions, however if big business is not interested then the high street is ripe to be reclaimed as a social space. We don't need a 're-hash' of existing legislation, we need a 'framework for mess' – a model which allows different assets and spaces to be cultivated with 'light-touch' management and permission to allow people the freedom to do things.
- Some opinion that there was 'too much high street around' and clearly a deficiency of demand. Need to recognise that trends do not continue forever. To what extent should we be slowing the current process down? – or allowing it to happen to clear the way for new things to happen?
- It's not just about addressing market failure. We need to find angles to engage people's passions and interests. Need to re-inforce the idea of an agitator – the help and support when needed to create change.

### What should the scope of a towns based action programme which seeks alternative town centre futures look like?

- The future is here – we need to deal with the now. We need to engage the users; real participation.
- Do we need a 'Landlords convention' - the relationship between landlords and agents is critical to the discussion and landlords are a key link into the broad canvas of the high street.
- We need a new conceptual framework for the high street based on social space and enterprise
- We need new public good metrics; sub-optimal performance of individual budgets and workstreams might create better overall use of resources to achieve the best overall outcome i.e. real best value, impact based
- Acceptance of the shrinkage of the high street. How might it be used – possibly residential spaces?
- Scope for service orientated businesses located within the town centre.
- What what an Enterprise Zone pilot for the High Street look like?

- Do we need to let things evolve? 'Loosen things up' and dispense with the heavy top down directives.
- Can we engender local people to do things for themselves, capitalize on local identity and distinctiveness – 'doing the right thing for your place'.

### What have we got and what do we need in terms of collaboration, innovation and capacity to achieve these futures?

- We need a way of visualising organic change happening already on the ground and valuing it to inform resource and policy decisions
- Can we transfer assets to the community and allow them to take some risk?
- How do we measure success – some measures are intangible: feelings/ beauty?
- Seems to be a 'janitorial focus' to town centres – functions that should be performed anyway – key moves need to be to allow enterprise.
- Visions and Value – need procedures to put planning upfront.
- How we assess, budget, allocate resources is still short term.
- Do we need a 'truth and reconciliation commission' for people who hold resources and people that need them?
- Community empowerment and renewal – need to bring people in on something that they want to happen.
- Need agitators complemented by a suitable support framework.
- Our actions count. We need to be accountable.
- We need to understand scaling in terms of 'condition making'



### Next Steps

The workshop concluded with a commitment to three actions:

- Distil the information from the workshop into a briefing paper to inform Scottish Government Policy and work by Scotland's Towns Partnership.
- Share the material as a joint resource – an 'open-source' document.
- An agreement by Creative Scotland to host a follow-up workshop