Towns & Town Centres

Nowhere is the rhetoric-reality gap bigger than in Scotland’s towns and town centres. There is unanimous consensus amongst all our political parties that our towns play a central role in Scottish life; are significant sources of employment; in need of significant regeneration; and at the heart of the local economy. The list is endless as politicians fall over each other to champion Scotland’s towns.Why is it, then, that most of our town centres are either in a state of arrested decay or suffering accelerating decline? Is it because of a lack of funds or is the problem more fundamental?

Across Scotland our towns are struggling badly. Being at the heart of local economies, they have borne the brunt of the recession with significant job losses and business closures. Some have weathered the storm better than others, but more often than not our towns represent the human face of market failure and misguided policies. So, what has gone wrong?

To put simply, our town centres have struggled to find their place in a post-industrial, globalised economy and many now find themselves unfit for purpose, wedded to a failing, retail centric operating model. The recession merely exacerbated existing consumer trends (popularity of internet shopping) and cultural attitudes (preference for city centre or out of town shopping). Today, the decline of our high streets has become systemic and the efforts to regenerate them largely ineffective. The challenge facing Scotland’s towns is vast: how do we rethink the role and function of towns while meeting the mounting economic and social challenges?

If we can’t throw money at it what can we do?

The demise of town centres is a significant problem for local government across Scotland. At the turn of the year, retail sales suffered their worst slump for more than a decade, consumer confidence continued to fall, 1 in 7 shops were vacant in the UK and 50% of all leases were up for renewal before 2015. Unsurprisingly, how you regenerate towns with less money is a question many are asking themselves. The problem in Scotland is that there are few places that provide any solutions following the closure of the “Town Centres and High Streets Learning Network”.

The story across the UK differs markedly, albeit the policy prescriptions have hardly been revolutionary. Wales have published an inquiry into town centre regeneration while the UK Government commissioned the Portas Review into High Streets. In Scotland, the Government’s concern has been elsewhere with a national review promised for 2012 in its Regeneration Strategy. The Scottish Government has not simply been focusing efforts in other areas but is becoming more and more “spatially blind” by embedding a policy bias against towns. Why have towns dropped so dramatically from the political agenda?

A Future beyond Retail

The introduction of the Town Centre Regeneration Fund (TCRF) in 2009 marked a high point for The Scottish Government’s concern for town centres. The £60m fund demonstrated that our

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1 See: “Scottish retail sales suffer worst slump since 1999”, 15 February 2012, BBC News.
3 See: “1 in 7”, February 2012, Professor Leigh Sparks.
6 See: “Achieving a Sustainable Future for All”, December 2011, Scottish Government. Our point is not to claim that the Government have been lazy; far from it. See footnote 1 for an illustration of their work.
Government and parliamentarians were finally listening and no longer ignoring the deep problems affecting our towns. The clarion call for change crossed political party divides as did the urgency for action. Across Scotland, town centres invested this money to regenerate their ailing physical infrastructure. And then it was over. TCRF was a one-hit wonder, a temporary reprieve, as the mounting problems facing our town centres were put back in their box. Political discourse shifted into election mode in 2011 then referendum mode and has stayed there ever since.

Urban policy, meanwhile, has become excessively focused on the development of our cities. Towns continue to get lost between an emphasis on cities on the one hand and remote rural settlements on the other. Amidst this uncertainty and silence, we have been focusing our attention and efforts on getting towns back on the political agenda. Our Policy Group continues to push the policy envelope by asking tough questions on the future role and function of town centres, whilst playing a leading role in the formation of the Scotland’s Towns Partnership.

If town centres are to have a future at all they must begin to address the deep-seated economic, environmental and social challenges that face them. The time for talking has gone. It is time for action. This is what local government needs to do to re-imagine our high streets and deliver a future beyond retail.

**We don’t know what we know**

There is a real absence of good, reliable, consistent data on Scotland’s town centres. All towns and town centres need firstly to understand themselves through a systematic, replicative, efficient and affordable data collection and benchmarking exercise. How else are we meant to know what is going on and what works and what does not? In an era of “evidence based policymaking” this is unacceptable. Indeed, it begs the question what local authorities and central government are basing their decisions on? Good data that is routinely and systematically analysed is a critical first step for local government that should be centrally funded by the Scottish Government.

**Vision**

Without a clear, long-term strategic vision and action plan town centre regeneration will ultimately fail. The research and case studies into TCRF showed that many local authorities had limited project planning, a real dearth of vision and poor monitoring and evaluation protocols. Essentially, the regeneration efforts were primarily based on physical infrastructure that failed to address the interconnected and multi-dimensional problems facing town centres. If councils are to “get at” the problems and avoid the “hanging basket” phenomenon, all regeneration efforts must emanate from a holistic whole town strategy that is developed by and for the area it serves.

Whole town strategies provide the necessary building blocks for towns and town centres, yet if all they do is prop up failing, retail centric models councils are wasting their time. Local authorities must take a step back and dispassionately look at the bigger picture by asking what role and function town centres should have in a low carbon future.

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9 It has to be said that the review of TCRF discovered major problems in how the money was distributed and spent. See: *“TCRF Case Studies Report”*. TCRF is largely a lesson in how not to spend public money.


11 We have lent heavily on the discussions and outputs of our policy group for the towns section of the manifesto. See footnote 47 for the recent paper.


Crucially, this process cannot be driven by an “outdated version of a past that arguably never existed and does not match our modern twenty-first century society”. It must accept reality by shrinking the retail offering and embracing residentialisation to map out a coherent and deliverable post-retail future where our towns become multi-functional social places. Rolling out free public WIFI would be a simple way of kick-starting this process.

**Delivery**

Our towns and town centres require urgent investment. Simply put, they need an annual Town Centre Regeneration Fund. However, the Government has made it very clear that this will not happen given the budgetary pressures they face. Local authorities have no choice but to navigate their own path. This does not necessitate a reversion to top-down policies that seek to homogenise our towns and town centres, however. If our towns are to reimagine their role they need alternative delivery arrangements to integrate the different interests that focus on place and embed a whole community approach to deliver local solutions for towns.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, this does not require more money. Councils need to start using place-based budgets and no longer plan and spend by theme. The public pound should be looked at in its totality if local authorities are serious about creating a unique sense of place in their towns and on the high street. This would not only see a more efficient use of public expenditure but re-energise local accountability and engagement.

Secondly, we need a “framework for mess”. Generally, local government has not been an effective mechanism for locally based, holistic interventions. By their nature, councils are risk averse, afraid of change and many do not have a structure that allows community planning to be successful or allow meaningful collaboration with the private and third sectors. What local authorities need to do is “let go” and allow different assets and spaces to be nurtured with “light-touch” management - that is, allow communities to take responsibility for their own spaces.

This would require a substantive change in the way local government thinks and operates. Rather than focusing on central control and delivery, councils would have to decentralise power and responsibility to create space for things to happen. In removing town centres from the current systems, councils could pilot the reallocation of budgets to a designated team under new and autonomous governance structures - town teams, Super BIDS, community development trusts, BIDS and so on. In some instances this will be easy to achieve. BIDs, for instance, are established mechanisms in regenerating town centres as are development trusts.

Thirdly, and very much linked to the previous point, local authorities and central government have to invest in building capacity at a local level to ensure those already engaged in the system (vested interests) do not create elite-driven localism. Often the areas that suffer from market failure are those with the highest levels of multiple deprivation, disengagement and apathy. These communities will have no idea how to engage in something as alien as participative decision-making.

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14 See “A Provocation on Town Centres and High Streets”, 21 February 2012, Professor Leigh Sparks, Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling and Chair of the CSPP Scottish Towns Policy Group.
15 50% of our retail floor space is now out of town and in a few years we will see a “retreat of the major brands from the marginal centres to the prime centres in the big cities and out of town shopping centres”. See: “20 things to do on the high street without shopping”, 21 February 2012, Julian Dobson, Urban Pollinators.
17 See: “Local platforms for distinctiveness and innovation”, 21 February 2012, Diarmaid Lawlor, AD+S (first video, 19:45 minutes in)
18 See: “The role of community planning partnerships in economic development”, November 2011, Audit Scotland.
19 See: “Wanted? Town Centre Truth and Reconciliation Committees”, 22 February 2012, Professor Leigh Sparks, Stirling Retail.
20 The Portas Review touches on several of these notions.
It will take time and significant resources to unearth community assets not to mention strong leadership. After all, “successful places require good leadership”. Local and central government purport to be supportive of community-based regeneration. It is time they walked the walk.

**Final Thoughts**
The last year has saw towns and town centres become marginalised as a policy issue. The problems haven’t gone away. The opposite is true in fact. Many of our town centres are dying, teetering on the brink with no purpose or strategic vision for the future. That has to change. Home to over 50% of the Scottish population and 60% of jobs, our towns and town centres are “vital components of the social and economic fabric of the country”. The importance of our towns extends beyond mere metrics, however. Irrespective of their decline, they still retain a deeply important sense of place and provide the social and economic glue that enable many of us to call towns our home. “Quality of place matters”.

If we continue to sit back or pursue policies that have failed in the past the ship will sink and dull uniformity in the guise of “clone towns” will reign. Town centres have a future but it differs from the nostalgic, romanticised version of the past. It requires nothing less than a fundamental rethink of how we put people and place together. Manifesto for mess anyone?

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