trading places

Anne Findlay and **Leigh Sparks** on the outcomes from the first World Towns Leadership Summit and recent policy approaches on towns and town centres in Scotland, where the event was held

don't forget about our towns

UK planning seems to be lurching from City Deals to localism with a certain recklessness and disregard for scale and meaningful geographies. There is nothing between block-coloured maps of macro-regions and the eye-candy of GIS pinpoint data; a reflection of official datasets and GIS techniques. But what about the intervening places such as towns? These are meaningful places where a great many (if not the majority of) people do business, go to school, enjoy leisure, live, shop and work.

In 2016 the inaugural World Towns Leadership Summit took place.[1] The Summit came about after discussions between the International Downtown Association, BIDS Scotland, Scotland's Towns Partnership, and the Association of Town and City Management. The delegates from across the world were passionate about managing, financing and planning towns and urban districts. This international recognition of the importance of towns contrasts with much of the approach across the UK.

The Summit took place in Edinburgh. Significantly Scotland has taken a different path from the rest of the UK in thinking about places; towns have been a key driver of place-based planning agendas.

Here, we consider first a brief review of the actions on towns that have been taken in Scotland in recent years[2] (Fig. 1 supports this discussion) and thus the rationale for hosting the Summit in Scotland, and, secondly, the main lines of the World Towns Framework that summarised the thinking from the Summit.

The Scottish experience

In 2012, the Scottish Government responded to the crisis in town centres by establishing a National Review of Town Centres. Rather than focusing on the symptom – empty shops and a declining 'high street' – this review tackled the cause: what are towns for, and how do we think about and care for place?

Reporting in July 2013,[3] the Expert Advisory Group focused on the underlying rationale for investing in and re-energising towns. The social and economic benefits for all sectors of the population, and the essentially sustainable attributes of towns, provide the focus for the recommendations. Under an overarching 'Town Centre First Principle' the review lined up six core themes to be pursued – town centre living, digital towns, proactive planning, accessible services, local economic growth, and creative and entrepreneurial places. The Scottish Government accepted the review findings and in November 2013 published its response and call to action as the Town Centre Action Plan (TCAP).[4]

This led to a public commitment between the Government and COSLA (the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) to implement the Town Centre First Principle,[5] not only for retail but for public and other private investment where possible. While not formally or legally binding, the public nature of the commitment has focused actions to stop developments outside existing town centres. Within government the Minister challenged government departments to actively support the themes of the TCAP. These various themes of the National Review of Town Centres and the Action Plan were supported through a variety of demonstration projects, funded in an attempt to work out what could best deliver change against the themes

In recognition of the fragmented landscape of bodies operating in the broad 'towns space', small-scale funding was provided to Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP).[6] The aim was to promote STP as the 'go-to' body for towns in Scotland, collating learning and activities from others, providing a single voice, and amplifying the activities under way, whether undertaken by STP or by other bodies. A Cross Party Group (CPG) for Towns and Town Centres was also established, providing a regular parliamentary forum to debate progress and activities following the introduction of the Town Centre Action Plan. Attended at least once a year by the Minister, the CPG reinforces the cross-party interest and support that towns and the Action Plan had garnered and pursues the detail from the annual parliamentary debates on the topic.

A number of tools to help town and place managers have emerged, including the Town Centre
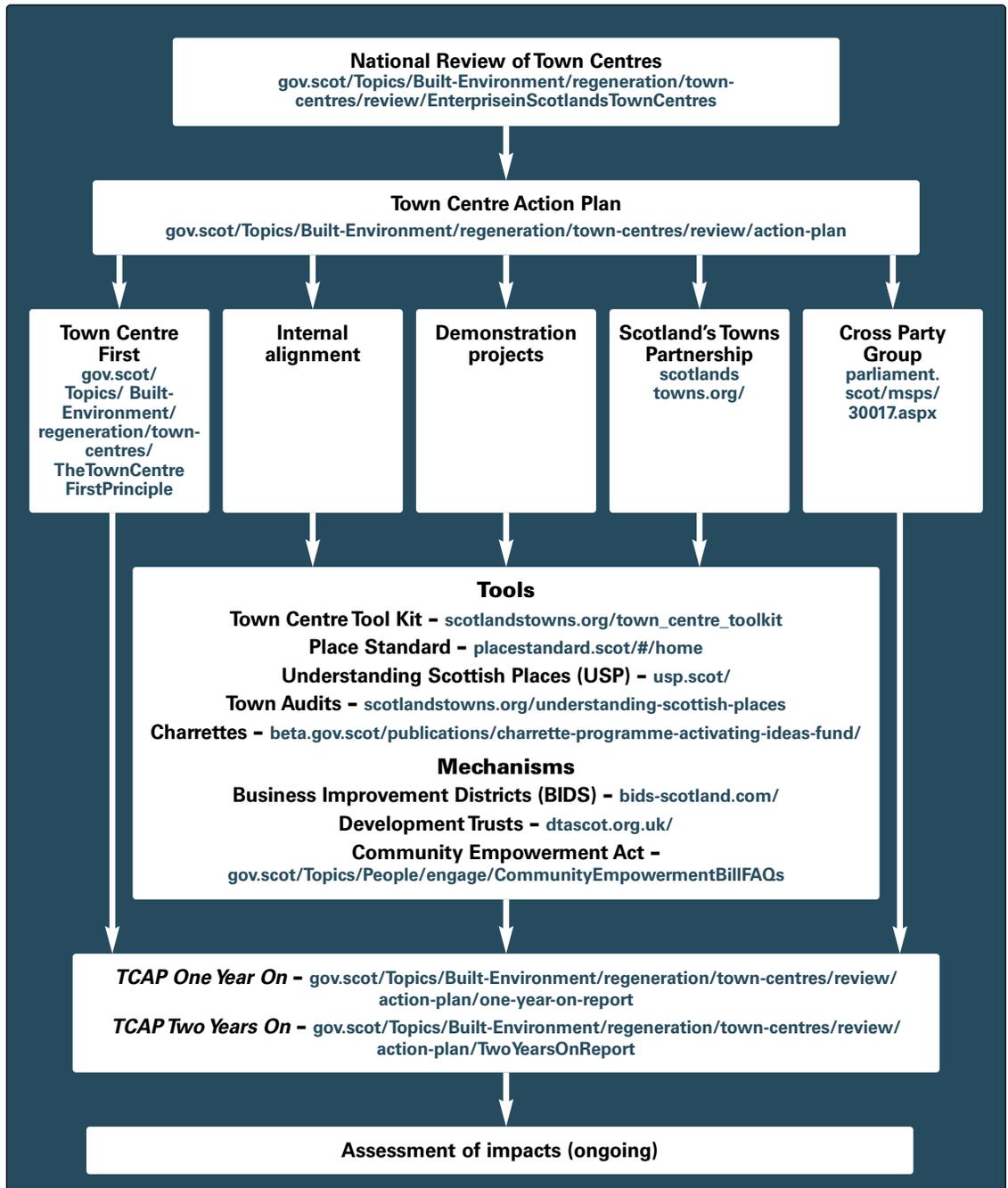
National Review of Town Centres
gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/town-centres/review/EnterpriseinScotlandsTownCentres

Town Centre Action Plan
gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/town-centres/review/action-plan

Town Centre First
gov.scot/ Topics/ Built-Environment/ regeneration/town-centres/ TheTownCentre FirstPrinciple

Internal alignment

Demonstration projects

Scotland's Towns Partnership
scotlands towns.org/

Cross Party Group
parliament. scot/msps/ 30017.aspx

Tools
Town Centre Tool Kit – scotlandstowns.org/town_centre_toolkit
Place Standard – placestandard.scot/#/home
Understanding Scottish Places (USP) – usp.scot/
Town Audits – scotlandstowns.org/understanding-scottish-places
Charrettes – beta.gov.scot/publications/charrette-programme-activating-ideas-fund/
Mechanisms
Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) – bids-scotland.com/
Development Trusts – dtascot.org.uk/
Community Empowerment Act –
gov.scot/Topics/People/engage/CommunityEmpowermentBillFAQs

TCAP One Year On – gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/town-centres/review/
action-plan/one-year-on-report
TCAP Two Years On – gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/town-centres/review/
action-plan/TwoYearsOnReport

Assessment of impacts (ongoing)

Fig. 1 Scottish policy on towns and town centres, from the 2013 National Review to the present day
Notes:
The hyperlinks provide links to material as of 19 October 2016
Demonstration project details can be found in the TCAP and TCAP reports
Charrette details are for 2016-17 – previous details are vailable from the Scottish Government's SSCI (Scottish Sustainable Communities Initiative) Charrette Mainstreaming Programme webpage, at gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/AandP/Projects/SSCI/Mainstreaming
The Cross Party Group for Towns and Town Centres (as with all groups) disbanded on the dissolution of Parliament in April 2016 and is currently being reconstituted with the new MSP intake

Toolkit,[7] the Place Standard,[8] Understanding Scottish Places (USP)[9] and various town audit approaches. Consistent approaches and applications of these tools provide a focus for self-analysis of places and towns and a method of beginning conversations about change, often enabled via an enhanced programme of local charrettes.[10]

Mechanisms to enable change in some cases pre-dated the Action Plan, but received a new stimulus and focus from it. Business Improvement Districts[11] and Development Trusts[12] enable new management of assets and places and have expanded since the National Review. More directly political, the community focus was legislated via the Community Empowerment Act,[13] which gives various rights to communities and helps asset transfer and ownership for community and social good.

'While no doubt there could have been further activity and some elements have worked better than others, the overall effect is of a co-ordinated attempt to understand and improve the situation for Scotland's towns'

To assess progress, the Government produced, in November 2014 and November 2015, respectively, the *Town Centre Action Plan One Year On*[14] and *Two Years On*.[15] Each publication has been the subject of a parliamentary debate on the broad topic of towns. While no doubt there could have been further activity and some elements have worked better than others, the overall effect is of a co-ordinated attempt to understand and improve the situation for Scotland's towns. It is this coherence that led to the idea of the Summit and attracted it to Scotland. Could Scotland both inform and learn from the activities in towns across the globe?

The World Towns Framework

The World Towns Framework[16] is the tangible outcome of the Summit, having been created through open engagement with communities and stakeholder organisations in the public, private and third sectors across the world, and through participative debate at the Summit. The intention was to develop an agreement (now a framework) for the best approaches to making great places/towns while

recognising that this is a bottom-up and not a top-down endeavour. Four key principles were identified and adopted to drive this articulation of the towns[17] narrative:

- **Principle 1: The unique identities of place:** Each town is unique and has a distinctive 'DNA of place', which once identified can be used to engage communities, businesses and institutions in driving forward their future, and to address the plural and distinctive set of challenges facing that unique place. The unique vision for each place needs to recognise that towns are rapidly changing. Drawing on the insights of new citizens, cultures, businesses and institutions, towns must build the capacity to deal with rapid change while limiting negative impact on the unique character of their place. There are multiple pathways to future success, and different towns will adopt different strategies based on triggers for action, forms of leadership, and cultural values.
- **Principle 2: Local economies:** Local business ownership and local independent economic activity are central to ensuring resilient growth and place success. A sustainable (and increasingly circular) local economy means fewer travel miles, promoting the use of local businesses, and keeping resources in the area. The scale of towns facilitates people meeting each other, sharing information, opportunities and insights. Great towns thrive on shared knowledge and connections, both within the town but also across the network of towns and relationships that every town has. Towns should find their own place in this wider networked economy and society. Towns need to be differentiated within networks, maximising comparative advantages but gaining from and contributing to the network.
- **Principle 3: Governance and citizenship:** Towns have great economic and social relationships. These relationships foster collaboration, based on shared outcomes. Successful places embrace the blurring, bridging and fusion of the traditional boundaries between public, commercial and community sectors. Towns need to welcome new cultures and forms of citizenship, building and planning towns which connect rather than separate citizens. Community engagement is a key element and is a powerful tool to raise awareness in communities about the value of cultural diversity. We need inclusive, transparent and open structures that engage citizens and direct the future of towns. Traditionally, leadership has been about leading from the front, but we must reduce reliance on traditional top-down initiatives, with the web and digital technologies

increasing opportunities to engage, collaborate and co-create.

● ***Principle 4: Environments:*** Environmental resources, and responsibility for their stewardship, enhance towns and support future generations. Sustainability is key, respecting and nurturing all assets, including environmental, cultural, built, economic, social, human and technological assets. Climate change is already impacting on our towns in different ways, but no one place can adapt on its own. These challenges require open co-operation and collaboration between urban areas. Collective action is needed to make our towns more resilient to climate change, protecting citizens from the risks it poses and making the most of opportunities it may present. The value of public places for communities needs to be seen as a distinct asset. New places should be planned in a way that hosts future local routines, creates collective memories, nurtures shared values, and caters for people's need for both quietness and social interaction.

Summary

The experience of Scotland since 2012 has focused on towns as meaningful places. Attempts have been made to join up activities and make the focus the town/place. There remains a long way to go, and not all town managers and local authorities have fully embraced the required change of focus. Elsewhere, as seen in the Summit, similar challenges are being encountered and met. The World Towns Framework is an attempt to focus on key themes, while recognising the differences and place/town specificities that exist.

There is much unfinished business, but if we can build meaningfully focused towns with engaging environments and a governance and citizenship for all, then we surely will have better towns, and indeed in turn better high streets. That is the hope – and ambition – of those involved in the Summit and its aftermath.

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Notes

1 See Scotland's Towns Partnership's 'World Towns Leadership Summit' webpage, at scotlandstowns.org/world_towns_leadership_ summit

2 A fuller version of this discussion can be found in 'From the Scottish Government's National Review of Town Centres to the World Towns Summit'. Sirlingretail blog entry, Aug. 2016. stirlingretail.com/2016/08/16/ from-the-scottish-governments-national-review-of-town-centres-to-the-world-towns-summit/

3 *Community and Enterprise in Scotland's Town Centres*. National Review of Town Centres External Advisory Group Report. Scottish Government, Jul. 2013. gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/ town-centres/review/EnterpriseinScotlandsTownCentres – comparisons with the Portas and Grimsey Reviews can be found in A. Findlay and L. Sparks: 'Reviewing high streets and town centres'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2013, Vol. 82, Nov., 456-8 (a fuller, 8-page version is available online at stirlingretail.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/tp_nov13_web.pdf)

4 *Town Centre Action Plan – the Scottish Government Response*. Scottish Government, Nov. 2013. gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/ town-centres/review/action-plan

5 See the Scottish Government's 'The Town Centre First Principle' webpage, at gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/town-centres/TheTownCentreFirstPrinciple

6 See the Scotland's Towns Partnership website, at scotlandstowns.org/

7 *Town Centre Toolkit*. Scottish Government, Apr. 2015. gov.scot/Resource/0047/00475185.pdf

8 See the Place Standard website, at placestandard.scot/#/home

9 USP is unique in taking a towns-based approach to consistent data presentation – see the Understanding Scottish Places website, at usp.scot/

10 See, for example, *People and Places: Design Charrettes Programme 2016-17. Activating Ideas Fund 2016-17*. Scottish Government, Aug. 2016. beta.gov.scot/publications/charrette-programme-activating-ideas-fund/

11 See the Business Improvement Districts Scotland website, at bids-scotland.com/

12 See the Development Trusts Association Scotland website, at dtascot.org.uk/

13 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2105. TSO, 2015. gov.scot/Topics/People/engage/CommEmpowerBill

14 *Town Centre Action Plan – One Year On*. Scottish Government, Nov. 2014. gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/town-centres/review/action-plan/one-year-on-report

15 *Town Centre Action Plan – Two Years On*. Scottish Government, Nov. 2015. gov.scot/Resource/0049/00494537.pdf

16 See Scotland's Towns Partnership's 'A World Towns Agreement – have your say!' webpage, at scotlandstowns.org/a_world_towns_agreement

17 In the Framework the phrase towns is often rendered as towns and urban districts, in recognition that there are different forms of towns and that the network of towns is also important, especially in more densely populated urban areas