



Town centre concern

Five-year ban on out-of-town developments 'could save Scotland's high streets'

Expert panel commissioned by Government calls for extreme new measures to 'right wrongs' of failings on Scottish towns

Exclusive

By Martin Williams

OUT-OF-TOWN developments should be suspended for five years and a levy on online shopping introduced to breathe new life into Scotland's crisis-hit town centres, according to Government advisers.

A Government-commissioned panel has warned that there is an "unfair playing field stacked against town centres which have become "too expensive" to operate from and that there is a need to "right

some wrongs".

It says the "Town Centre First" principle which ministers agreed with local authority leaders in July 2014, sold as "marking a significant shift in public policy towards town centres", has not fully achieved its goals.

The Town Centre Action Plan Review Group was commissioned by Scotland's Communities Secretary Aileen Campbell to consider how the nation's towns can be made greener, healthier, and more equitable and inclusive places. It warned that out-of-town development proposals

can continue to obtain permission by local authorities, thus "maintaining support for activities that damage town centres, the climate and exacerbate inequalities".

While there was a large supply of vacant and derelict land and under-used buildings within town centres that could be utilised for more sustainable development, the out-of-town option is "chosen for ease and cheapness".

And it suggested a moratorium on out-of-town development of the form that involves large volumes of car parking should be considered for a period of five



years. "This might be seen as too draconian or too blunt an approach given the likely need for some regionally or nationally important developments on new sites. Nonetheless a moratorium should be the starting point with with exceptions permitted only for nationally important exceptional reasons," the review said.

Radical change

CHAIRMAN of the group, respected retail academic Professor Leigh Sparks, said: "The time has come to put our town centres first. And fast. We simply cannot continue with the cards stacked against them as they are. It's abundantly clear that the world in which we find ourselves compels meaningful – sometimes difficult – action to deliver radical change.

"When it comes to Scotland's towns and town centres, that means righting some wrongs and creating a fairer playing field on which town centres have the best opportunities to not just survive, but to thrive; an environment where it is cheaper and more attractive to invest in them, for the good of people, planet and the economy. We need to create communities which are cleaner, greener and more equitable. To achieve that, governments (local and national) need to tackle the systematic inequalities which are holding back our town centres and focus on making them deliver."

The grave challenges hitting the Scottish retail sector have been underlined by new figures showing a dramatic downturn in high street and shopping centre footfall in January. Scottish footfall plunged by 72.5 per cent year on year in January after the whole of the country was moved into the highest level of lockdown conditions to halt the spread of coronavirus, figures published by the Scottish Retail Consortium (SRC) reveal.

The deputy principal and professor of retail studies at the University of Stirling said the advice was to stop supporting

activities which damage town centres. He said: "We suggest a number of approaches. One urges a five-year moratorium on out-of-town developments. Contentious? Perhaps. But 60 years of disaggregation in development needs to be reversed. This decentralisation – driven by car use – has resulted in a hollowing out of activities

from town centres.

"It's led to the construction of off-centre mono-format developments, and this goes well beyond retailing, which has left local services being insufficient to meet local needs – or inaccessible without a car."

The review warned that out-of-town operations "well beyond retailing" have benefited from operating and development costs which are cheaper than in town centres.

'Societal cost'

THEIR ease of operation on purpose built sites also reduced costs while the "wider societal cost in terms of wellbeing of planet and people" remains unconsidered".

Prof Sparks added: "Developments of all kinds must be focused on town centres. That means the incentives to invest must be better, with our taxes reflecting our ambitions and activities. Town centres need to be cheaper places to turn to – and they should be easier to develop and operate in, including by community and third-sector organisations, and for a diversity of activities and functions.

"It's not right that there are incentives for developing out of town which do not exist in town centres."

The Government advisers also call for a review of non-domestic rates system which is "widely perceived to be operationally broken and unfair", although it acknowledges that some form of property use tax makes sense.

"It needs an overhaul ... The rates system should be amended so as to reduce rates for town centre uses and increase them elsewhere including for out-of-town uses," they said.

Prof Sparks added: "Rates need to be reduced for town centres and increased elsewhere. This would help bring more businesses and people into our towns, reducing inequality of access. It needs to be cheaper to rebuild and renovate our heritage in town centers than eat up greenfield and other land."



Decentralisation – driven

by car use – has resulted in a hollowing out of activities from town centres. We need to create communities which are cleaner, greener and more equitable





**Professor
Leigh
Sparks of
Stirling
University
and
Scottish
minister
Aileen
Campbell**

