

Transcript of Presentation 18th February 2021

In July 2020 I was asked by Aileen Campbell, Cabinet Secretary to chair a Town Centre Action Plan Review Group. We've now produced the final report from that review group entitled A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres.

The review of the Town Centre Action Plan was asked to do a number of things. We were asked to review progress and scope since the development of the Town Centre Action Plan and to produce a revised vision for towns. That vision needed to meet the climate change ambitions and to develop healthier, vibrant, greener town centres. The aim was to produce a vision, but also how we might implement that vision.

Over the last decade, Scotland has led the way in terms of the United Kingdom and Ireland in the way it looked at town centres. The National Review of Town Centres, led by Malcolm Fraser in 201/13 was a major step forward. And from that, the Town Centre Action Plan was developed and then implemented.

COSLA and the Scottish Government produced the town centre first agreement, which developed additionally into the place principle and recently the place based investment programme.

So Scotland has a very sound basis on which to look at how it's dealing with towns.

But as ever, there are many things that can be done better. Over that last decade, the country has rather enhanced ambitions. We've developed a much stronger framework around community empowerment. The government has indicated the response it needs for the climate emergency and has developed a series of national outcomes and tied those to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. A focus on wellbeing and inequalities and now on social renewal have also been hallmarks of the way in which the last decade has changed.

So it's timely that we're moving forward the Town Centre Action Plan.

That would have been true in any case, but it's been further made a priority by the rapid spread of Covid 19 over 2020 in Scotland which has exacerbated existing inequalities, and provided some new ones as well. But within that, we've also seen people emphasise the value of local, neighbourhood and community and those are positive things. We've also exposed, in some cases, local supply chains and a lack of local resilience. And in responding to those challenges, local governments and others have produced new, simpler forms of working together.

So there are lessons we can take from the way in which we responded to the pandemic and the things that the pandemic exposed in terms of our communities and towns.

In looking at the oral and written evidence that we received and, public surveys, and the previous work that's been carried out, we decided to adopt a vision. **Towns and town centres are for the well-being of people, planet and the economy. Towns are for everyone, and everyone has a role to play in making our towns and town centres successful.**

This reflects the change in terms of community and climate, but also that we have to work in partnership together, if we're going to make our towns and town centres succeed.

Whilst we have a sound basis on which to build, there is still an opportunity to strengthen the existing national policy context. However, even if we strengthen everything, it's very clear that many

of the activities that are carried out cause harm to our town centres and there is often a financial and other benefit to those activities. And that's something we probably need to stop doing. Thirdly, we've done a number of pilots and other demonstration projects at the local level, and there's been many excellent activities that have occurred in towns and town centres. We can extend those and extend our approaches and accelerate town centre renewal.

So we developed three types of recommendations.

Recommendation one is to strengthen the formal positioning of towns and town centres in national planning. That would include a requirement to produce town and town centre plans and to have those co-produced with communities, involving everyone in the community in looking at their place and the uniqueness of their place. We need to enhance data collection use at the town and town centre level. We've made a good start to that, but there's so much more that could be done both in quantitative data but also the lived experiences of people about their towns and town centres.

Secondly, we need to look at the current tax, funding and development systems to ensure that those ambitions (wellbeing, the economy in climate outcomes, fairness and equality) are at the heart of those systems. Currently, in many ways, we tend to reward activities that damage our town centres. We need now to really reverse that and level the playing field.

There are a range of suggestions here. They require more emphasis and a lot more effort to think through. But we need very seriously to address these issues. This will include amendments to the non-domestic rates, looking at the balance between in town and out of town developments, and in terms of the costs of reusing buildings as opposed to new development. Recognising the shift in terms of many activities to digital, we need to think about how tax can reflect the new economy and therefore look at digital tax.

It would be appropriate if we're thinking about climate to introduce a new out of town car parking space levy. And we're not talking just about retailing here, but a range of out of town uses. We need to emphasise the way in which active travel and other benefits can be delivered on the other hand.

Over a period of at least five years, we probably need to introduce a moratorium on out of town development and further focus developments within town centres.

Our third recommendation is that we need to expand and align funding for towns, town centres and projects.

We have an overall request that the Scottish government continues to expand and further align the funding available. The funding for town centre activities has to be substantial, has to be multi-year, and it needs to cover both revenue and capital spend. There's been a very good start in terms of substantial sums of money and for guarantees over a period of time. But we also need to do more work about the balance of revenue and capital so we don't just transfer assets and buy buildings. We know how to run them and can get community groups, development trusts and others much more closely involved.

We need to make these projects focussed around particular themes. Some of these were present in the Town Centre Action Plan from 2013, but others can be developed further.

We need to expand town centre living so we have a range of different types of occupier and uses within town centres that will bring more life and footfall into the town.

We need to emphasise the digital skills and uses that can be in towns and we need to make sure businesses and enterprises and the people within towns are skilled up to use the digital skills that we need, for the future economy. We should focus very much on enterprise in communities, and think about a strategic acquisition fund to alter the ownership, development and uses in town, particularly around local small business, community enterprises and entrepreneurship around local and circular economy. This is building very much on the ideas behind community wealth building.

And then we need to think about how we respond to climate change within town centres. We should focus on projects that can build out of existing programmes in climate action towns, think about microgeneration of energy, roof retrofitting of town centre buildings, about green jobs, alter space allowances within town centres for active travel, how pedestrians move around, and the green spaces and social settings that we have, so towns are more pleasant places, but also more resilient places. Generally, socially and also in terms of climate change, much of that also can be thought about in terms of the 20 minute neighbourhood concept.

To conclude, the current narrative that we see about town centres has often been a bit negative about the decline or the death of the town centre. That's very much overstated. One of the things the pandemic has shown us is how people want to be together, and value the social element of the ways in which we live our lives.

Decline is clearly not inevitable. We've encouraged it. We can now reverse it.

Towns can and should be the heart of the community, delivering for people, the planet and the economy. We need to make this happen. We believe that the recommendations, if implemented, can really help to do this.

There's far more information on the review, detail about the way in which we got to these recommendations and the detail behind them in the final report, which can be downloaded from the Scottish Government website, on futuretowns.scot and on this blog. There's also more information on futuretowns.scot on the oral and written evidence and the background material.

Leigh Sparks, Professor of Retail, Chair of the Town Centre Action Plan Review