

From the National Review of Town Centres and the Town Centre Action Plan to A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres and Town Centre Action Plan 2

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In 2016 for the World Towns Summit in Edinburgh I attempted to summarise what had set Scotland apart on its approach to towns and town centres. Much has changed in the intervening seven years, and I thought it time to again look at the 'bigger picture' and the route we are on.

This short, personal, piece is my view of the last decade or so, with all the faults that this can entail, but is intended to 'join the dots' at a high level (Figure 1).

The onset of the 'great recession' in 2007-8 reinforced and produced visible fault lines and scars across Scotland, as elsewhere. It heightened awareness of, and the urgency needed to tackle the changing nature of place and towns and our economic, social and cultural lives. Whilst many organisations were already playing a vital role given recession was not the only problem, responses in 2008-11 felt piecemeal and addressed symptoms rather than causes.

In 2012, Nicola Sturgeon (then Deputy First Minister) responded by establishing a National Review of Town Centres, chaired by Malcolm Fraser the leading architect and urban thinker. Rather than focusing on the symptom – empty shops and a declining 'high street' as in the Portas review in England - this review tackled the causes – what are towns for and how do we think about and care about places?

Reporting in July 2013, the National Review of Town Centres 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 provided the focus for the recommendations. Under an overarching 'town centre first' principle the Review lined up six core themes to be pursued and integrated and aligned them in such a way as to set up a blueprint for action. The Scottish Government accepted the Review and in November 2013 published their response and call to action as the Town Centre Action Plan.

There are many implications of this at a detailed level, but in terms of policy implementation the Town Centre Action Plan, in my view, generated two lasting lines of activities within which sometimes producing new things, sometimes aligning existing approaches.

The first of these was a public commitment, pursued firmly by the then Minister, Derek Mackay, with COSLA, to implement the Town Centre First principle, not only for retail but for public and other private investment where possible. Whilst not formally or legally binding, the public nature of the commitment focused attention and actions to stop developments outside existing town centres, where alternatives are clearly available. This was subsequently enshrined more broadly in the Place Principle.

Secondly, and 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). The aim was to establish STP as the 'go-to' body for towns in Scotland, collating learning and activities from others, providing a single voice and amplifying the activities underway, whether undertaken by STP, by other bodies, in demonstration projects or more widely.

Within, and beyond STP, a number of tools were developed including the Towns Toolkit, The Place Standard, Understanding Scottish Places (USP) and Town Centre Audits. Consistent approaches and applications of these tools provides a focus for self-analysis of places and towns and provides a method of beginning conversations about change. Other STP activities tied together policy and practice as in demonstration projects and a parliamentary Cross-Party Group.

In June 2016 the decision to leave the European Union signified a major disruption to the country. Other disruptions, of different forms, have coincided with this Brexit period. The recognition of the climate emergency and its formal declaration in Scotland showed a long-term crisis coming to full consciousness. Covid-19 in 2020 was a completely unanticipated shock to economy and society, necessitating conversations and actions for social and economic renewal.

At the same time the approach and legislative direction within Scotland has continued to diverge from England and the rest of the United Kingdom. The focus on society and community empowerment and community wealth building has been far stronger in Scotland as well as more explicit recognition of the urgency of actions to address climate impacts.

It is at this point that a long-held ambition to bring together Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP) and Scotland's Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) under one umbrella was realised when BIDS was taken over by STP. This has allowed the unique features of Scotland's legislation to begin to be utilised more broadly (as in Community Improvement Districts and other themed approaches) with Improvement Districts being one of several approaches places can adopt and adapt for their particular circumstances.

It is in this context, and in the pandemic, that a review of the Town Centre Action Plan took place and which I was asked to chair. My report 'A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres' reflected on the situation, progress in a decade or so and the steps needed for the future health of town centres, towns and community.

Focusing on people, planet and the economy 'A New Future' argued for strengthening planning further, using fiscal and taxation levers to reverse damaging developments and proposals and focused sustained investment in specific themed areas which benefit towns (eg living, digital, green, community). These align closely with the 20-minute neighbourhood principle.

The approach was formally endorsed by the Scottish Government and COSLA in 2022 and the plan is now in its delivery phase. Importantly planning has been strengthened via National

Planning Framework 4 and a five-year investment plan for places was agreed. Progress on the trickier issues of taxation and fiscal levers is stalled politically, but also due to the cost-of-living crisis brought on in part by the war in Ukraine.

At the core of much of this effort and energy remains Scotland's Towns Partnership (Figure 2), seeking to be a voice for Scotland's towns and an amplification of the great efforts underway locally and nationally. STP continues to run tools and toolkits as part of its resources for towns and to drive, energise and catalyse specific projects under the action plan.

It has three other roles, however. It remains the central body bringing together groups to review progress and dismantle barriers, now focused on the Town Centre Action Plan Review via the Ministerial/COSLA joint Town Centre Forum. STP also continues to run Scotland Loves Local, an innovation set up in the pandemic to promote local spending and which has achieved significant success, operating to strengthen communities and towns. Finally, Scotland's Improvement Districts remain a core component of STP.

As ever much remains to be done. We have the directions needed; we require a focused and rapid adoption of critical actions. Some of these are underway but more needs to be done on critical financial and cost issues.

Our towns and town centres have been steadily altered by decentralisation and changing economic, social and technological capabilities and behaviours. This has been going on for at least 50 years and has cumulated in our present situation. Scotland is not unique in this. Given half a century of decline and damage, expecting radical transformation and reversal of these macro-trends in the short time since 2013 is clearly unrealistic. But where Scotland is distinct is in having a coherent, aligned and formally recognised national plan for how to attempt to reverse the situation, including focusing on communities and community wealth building at the heart of the process.

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April 2023

Figure 1: From the National Review of Town Centres (2013) to Town Centre Action Plan 2 (2022)

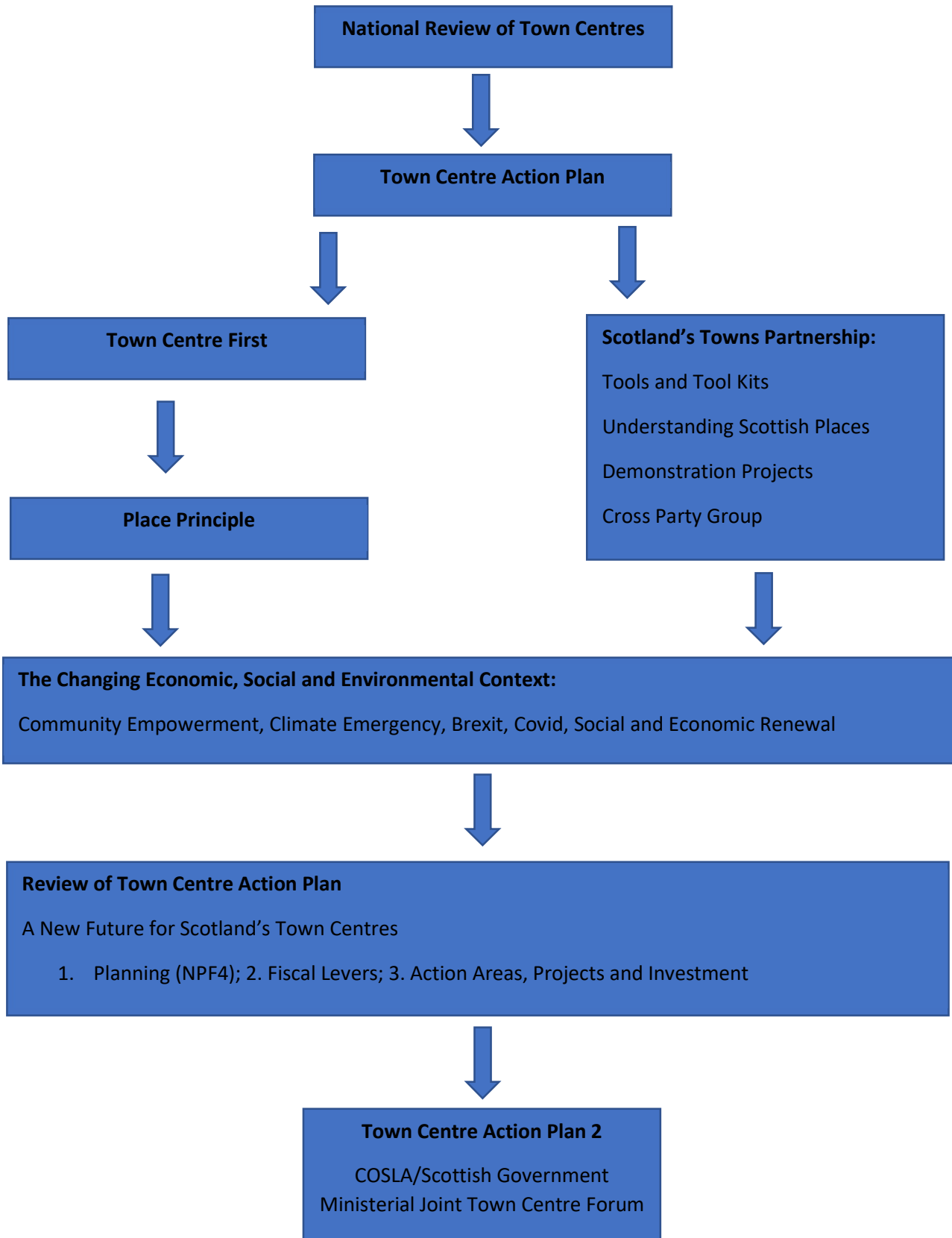


Figure 2: Scotland's Towns Partnership 2023

