

## Towns, High Streets, Resilience and Place Governance



Leigh Sparks, FRSE  
Professor of Retail Studies,  
Deputy Principal  
University of Stirling






BE THE DIFFERENCE

1

[News](#) [Blog](#) [View the old site](#) [Member login](#) [Contact](#)


[About](#) [Join](#) [Events](#) [Courses](#) [Services](#) [News](#) [The BID Foundation](#)



**Good Growth**  
Tackling big issues using place-based policy, theory and practice

- What we have now/what we had before Covid was not working
- Places are not islands and do not operate/exist in a vacuum

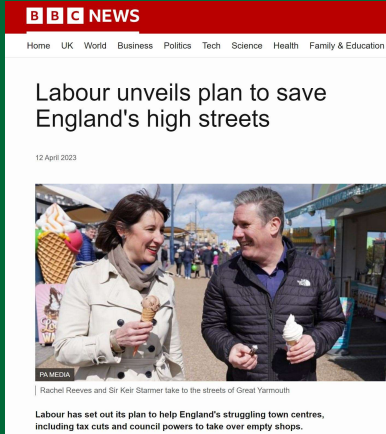
- Places are “governed”, “managed” or exist in various spatial contexts
- We need to think about governance for whom



BE THE DIFFERENCE

2

## Are we Serious?



To support local high streets, Labour says it would:

- Cut business rates for small businesses, paid for by raising taxes on online companies such as Amazon; Labour has said it wants to scrap business rates altogether in the long term
- Introduce a £700m voucher scheme allowing small businesses to make energy efficiency measures, for example installing double glazing or buying electric vehicles
- Tackle late payments to small businesses, by forcing big businesses to publish information on payment practices in their annual reports
- Give local councils powers to take over empty shops and reopen them without consent from property owners
- Introduce town centre patrols as part of its pledge to recruit 13,000 more neighbourhood police and PCSO officers

3



- Places, Spaces, Towns, High Streets
- Viability, Vitality, Resilience
- Government and Governance

**“Towns and town centres are for the wellbeing 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”**

**Vision – A New Future for Scotland’s Town Centres (2021)**

4

### Lots of Framing and Effort

- For whom?
- At what level?
- In what context?
- How organised?

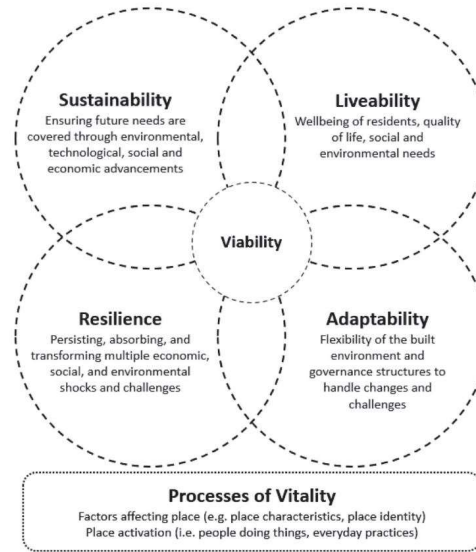


Fig. 1. Interrelated concepts of viability within the high street context.

5

### Processes for high street viability?

- What can we do now, here?
- How does what we do now, here, coalesce for longer-term impact?

N. Ntouyas et al.

Cities 134 (2023) 104182

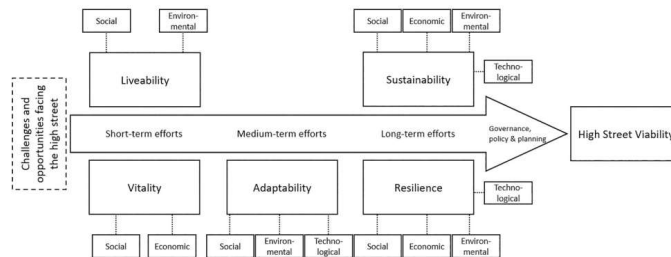


Fig. 3. Processes for high street viability.

6

- Have we got this backwards?
- Are we doing the “easy” things not the necessary things?
- Are we asking the right questions?
- Are we failing to act?
- Are we focused on the symptoms not the causes?
- Are we altering the fundamentals?



BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

## Scotland

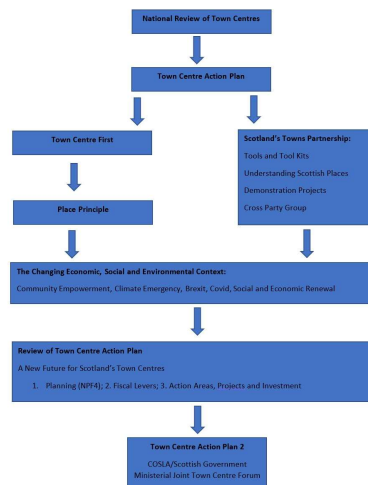
National Review of Town Centres (2012)

Town Centre Action Plan (2013)

A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres(2021)

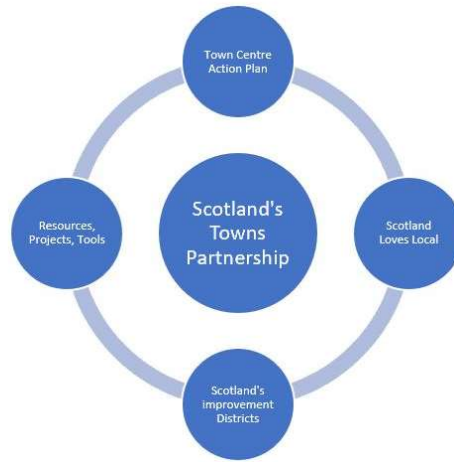
Town Centre Action Plan 2 (2022)

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



# Scotland's Towns Partnership

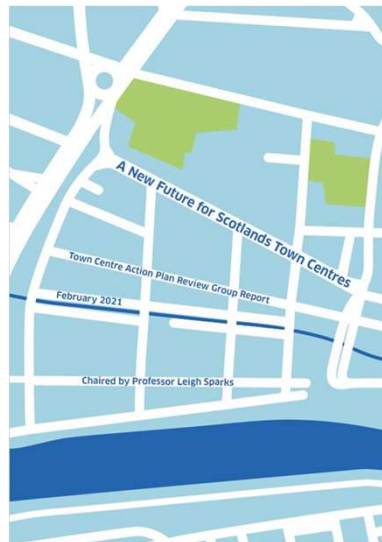
Figure 2: Scotland's Towns Partnership 2023



BE THE DIFFERENCE

## A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres

We won't succeed by doing the same things that we have for the last 50+ years only a little less badly. If we don't change course more radically it will be too late.



### Town Centre Action Plan Review - Joint response from Scottish Government and COSLA



April 2022



BE THE DIFFERENCE

## Why we won't succeed if BAU

1. The economy and society have changed
2. The pre-pandemic situation was not working
3. Existing operations will continue to do harm unless deflected and there are no disincentives for doing (or proposing new) bad things
4. We need to be a more inclusive society and economy and not an extractive one
5. Need to get serious if national policies (CWB, 20 Minute, Wellbeing, car kms) to be delivered, let alone dealing with climate change
6. Focusing attention on one part of the problem (in town) and ignoring the alternatives (out of town) and enablers (local services, transport) will reinforce adverse behaviours

11

## Recommendation 1

**Strengthen the formal positioning of towns and town centres in National Planning including requirements to produce town and town centre plans, coproduced with communities and enhance data collection and use at the town and town centre level**

- a) **Towns and town centres to be included and prioritised in National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)**
- b) **Town Centre Plans need to be developed and implemented with the local community and with a focus and commitment on the wellbeing of people, the planet and the economy**
- c) **Develop a revised and enhanced focus on measurement and data for towns and town centres**

12

## Recommendation 2

Scottish Government should review the current tax, funding and development systems to ensure that wellbeing, economy and climate outcomes, fairness and equality are at their heart. Potential suggestions for actions include

- a) Amendments to Non Domestic Rates (NDR)
- b) Amendments to VAT
- c) Introduce a digital tax
- d) Introduce an Out-of-Town Car Parking Space Levy
- e) Introduce a Moratorium on Out-Of-Town Development

## Recommendation 3

**Expanded and Aligned Funding of Demonstration Projects in Towns and Town Centres.**

We have an overall request that the Scottish Government continues to seek to expand and ensure further alignment of the funding available. Funding for town centre activities has to be substantial, multi-year and cover revenue and capital spend.

## Recommendation 3

We recommend that projects should be focused around themes of

- a) Town Centre Living Expansion – housing sector incentivisation in town centres
- b) Digital Skills and Use in Towns – skills development for businesses and enterprises and extended uses of various technologies to understand and change behaviours in town centres
- c) Enterprising Communities – Strategic Acquisition Fund to alter ownership, development and use patterns in town centres to encourage local small business, community enterprises and entrepreneurship around local and circular economies
- d) Climate Change Response – building on existing programmes in Climate Action Towns, micro-generation, retrofitting of town centres buildings and the alteration of space in town centres for active travel, pedestrian movement, green space and social settings, with a view to enhancing the resilience of town centres against climate change.

15

➤ What sort of society and economy do we need?

➤ What sort of places do we need?

➤ Resilience – for whom?

➤ Public/private governance?



### Will it work?

The strategy gives little detail about how its recommendations should be implemented. Providing money to local authorities does not necessarily empower communities. Beyond noting the need for an emotional connection between people and place, however, the plan is silent about how to include and engage those communities.

Research has highlighted several crucial needs: focused spending on local businesses; tackling problematic behaviour by corporations and absentee landlords; a rethink of how development and operational and fiscal systems might encourage – and not penalise – high-street activity.

By not considering the retail high street in the context of the people it serves, and in omitting these crucial needs, this strategy appears mostly a cosmetic one. It revolves around short-term lets for buildings, cleaner spaces (more bins) and street parties. We know recovery – and a sustainable high street future – requires much more than that.

16



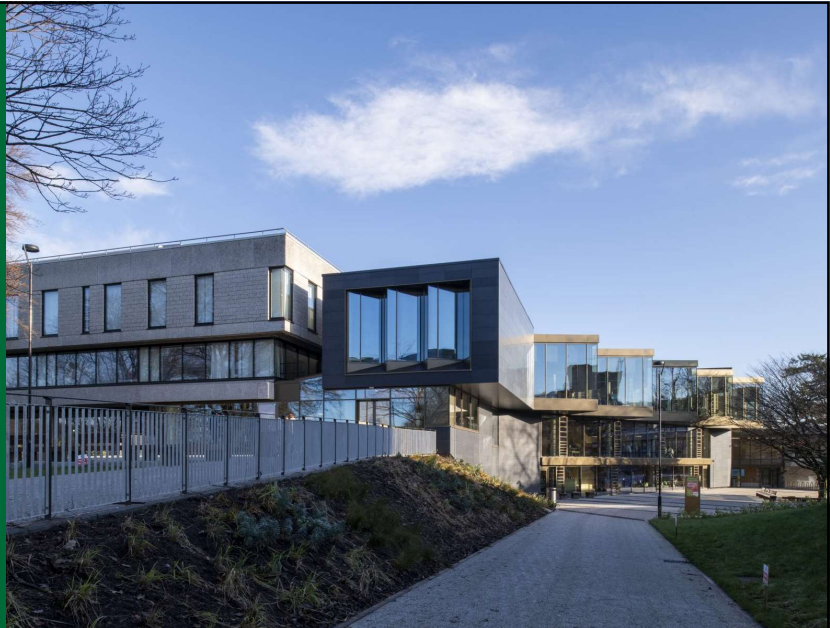
## In Conclusion

Local efforts will only go so far

Systemic, structural change is needed to really make a difference across our range of places

Things are working in some places despite the system – just think what we could achieve if the system helped us?

What does that mean for leadership and governance?



## THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

Leigh Sparks, Professor of Retail Studies, University of Stirling

Email: [leigh.sparks@stir.ac.uk](mailto:leigh.sparks@stir.ac.uk)

Web/blog: [www.stirlingretail.com](http://www.stirlingretail.com)

Twitter: sparks\_stirling