

TOWN CENTRE ACTION PLAN EXPERT REVIEW GROUP

COMMON WEAL RESPONSE

INTRODUCTION

Common Weal has been at the forefront of progressive thinking in Scotland and has produced an extensive library of policy covering almost all areas Scottish politics. This includes so far the world's only fully costed national plan for a Green New Deal¹ and a comprehensive post-Covid economic recovery plan² that would lead seamlessly into that Green New Deal. Further, our work on reform of local democratic structures³ and advocacy for local/community responses to economic and social challenges⁴ gives us insight not only on how these policies operate at national level but also, most importantly, how they apply at local levels such as town centres.

Town centre regeneration has been a topic subject to polarised opinion in Scottish political thinking. While many believe that 'something should be done' to reverse the long term decay of our towns, there are others who simply accept that the decline is either inevitable or even hold it to be a positive thing. Common Weal emphatically rejects this latter view especially as the pandemic and lockdown has demonstrated just how vital local community is in times of crisis.

The following shall contain a short summary of our work, particularly our Resilience programme, as it pertains to the restructuring of our town centres to adapt to the post-Covid world.

RESILIENT TOWNS: AN EXCERPT FROM THE RESILIENT SCOTLAND PLAN

The first phase of the Resilient Scotland plan deals with the acute impacts of the Covid pandemic and the economic lockdown. Patterns of working, shopping and social behaviour have changed radically in response to this and at least some of those changes are likely to be long term or permanent. Cities in particular have been affected by a reduction in footfall. The increase in people working from home will not just impact office space in the city but also all of the support services around those offices (from office supply companies down to the coffee shop on the corner) and these effects are already being seen. Meanwhile, people appear to be shopping less (again, not just affecting the shops but the cafes and services around them) not just because of safety concerns but because the demands of working from home are very different from working in an office. This reduction in physical footfall therefore appears to not be matched 1:1 with an increase in online shopping (though some demand shifting has indeed taken place). Whilst Scotland does need to consider the implications of online shopping for small businesses – perhaps by offering easier routes to online marketplaces without having to submit to near-monopsonistic companies like Amazon – Scotland must recognise that the total volume of retail sales may have decreased in the long term and should decrease further as we move to a Circular Economy based on sharing, leasing and making rather than endlessly buying disposable goods.

On the other side of this, town and community centres must place themselves ready to become a locus of community cohesion and participation in a way that has been ill served by previous centralised approaches. To do this, Scotland must introduce a proper system of local democracy to give communities control over how their town centres are reconfigured – policy applied *to* a community rather than *by* a community will almost certainly fail just as badly as have previous attempts to do this. Common Weal's Development Councils model would

meet this need without simply taking existing bureaucratic systems and scaling them down.

Fundamentally, the restructuring and restoration of our town centres should be based on the principle of 'Place', not profit, GDP, 'Added Value', 'Footfall' or other metrics designed for the promotion of a growth-based focus. The review of our towns strategies should take note that many town centres in Scotland are both severely under-utilised and lacking in critical infrastructure such as banking, shared service facilities, food cooperatives, tool libraries and – increasingly important in the post-Covid world – remote working facilities and community hubs.

Town centres must urgently review what they currently supply and work to match social and economic need to available assets. For example, a town centre may have a vacant commercial property – perhaps a larger former shop which cannot be let out to another larger company due to lack of demand nor to a smaller company due to it being too large for them to afford or manage. This shop could be sub-divided and turned into a combined public finance hub bringing together basic banking services, a post office, a central point for accessing public services, a tourist information point and business investment and support services. Under Common Weal's Development Councils model, communities could choose to convert vacant office space into remote working facilities (not every home environment is suited for working from home) and a National Resource Agency could supply assets and support for communities to manage a tool library, maker/craft spaces, share shops or a food cooperative.

Towns will have to reckon with the overvaluation of commercial properties which has led to properties remaining vacant as the owner – too often in the form of an asset portfolio rather than an individual – faces less in the way of financial loss from reduced rents than they would from writing down the value of their asset. Towns should introduce a 'use it or lose it' policy which would compel owners to make productive use of vacant properties or see it made subject to a Compulsory Sales/Purchase Order. A maximum vacancy term should also be introduced (and applied to vacant land as well as vacant properties) after which a CPO or CSO should be

issued. Community groups may be supported by organisations like the Scottish National Investment Bank to negotiate a realistic price to return a property to productive social use.

Scotland's increasingly service-led economy does mean that a substantial percentage of the population can – at least potentially – work remotely from the traditional office structure. The World Bank estimates that around 40 to 45 per cent of jobs in Scotland can be worked from home⁵ – but this number is calculated only on the basis that these jobs are office-type jobs that could be worked from any suitable workstation and does not consider if the home environment is itself suitable for the placement of such a workstation.

The post-Covid world has highlighted the impact of long commutes for many in the workforce. Unnecessary commutes contribute to traffic congestion, environmental damage and adverse health impacts both for the commuter and those who must live and work in high pollution zones – but they also absorb a substantial amount of time which could be better used by commuters for work, sleep, recreation or engaging with their community. Towns should set up remote working facilities which can be leased by companies and freelancers who cannot or do not wish to work from home. Models for this already exist in Scotland (The Melting Pot in Edinburgh being a prominent example) and ideally every community should be able to supply enough of these remote workstations such that everyone who wants one can reach one without having to drive to it.

Housing within Town Centres is another critical issue. High prices caused by the speculation of housing, commercial buildings and land has pushed accessible housing out and away from Town Centres which leads to increased commuting distances and lack of access to public services amongst other social and economic problems. There needs to be a new approach to public rental housing and Common Weal has set out how this can be achieved without the need for subsidy⁶.

Finally, the Green New Deal will demand a transformation in the way we construct our new buildings and especially demands that we retrofit the vast majority of our existing buildings to meet

the standards of the future. All new buildings constructed now that are expected to be in use past 2045 should already be being built to Green New Deal compliant standards as to do otherwise only compounds the problems of retrofitting.

The politics of retrofitting in Scotland is almost entirely dominated by discussions and strategies for retrofitting houses. In a sense this is right to do as fuel poverty is such a serious issue in Scotland and may only get worse if home working becomes more normal, but it tends to neglect the energy efficiency of public and commercial buildings which are often much less energy efficient than homes are. Where an average British home requires around 140 kW/m².year to adequately heat and a typical office around 120 kW/m².year, a large shop may require around 170 kW/m².year and a typical hotel or bar can require in excess of 300 kW/m².year^{6,7}. As Town Centres are planning how to cope with the changing use functions of their buildings, Town centre planning strategies must consider how they will renovate and retrofit those buildings to meet the demands of the climate emergency.

A Resilient economy is one that make productive but sustainable use of its resources, protects the environment and builds an economy that won't simply fall over during shocks. These principles apply as much to our town centres as they do to every other aspect of Scotland's social and economic framework. As previously said, any view that the decline of Scotland's town centres is inevitable or even as a sign of 'progress' should be rejected. It did not work when it was tried before and will not work again as we rebuild from the current crisis.

A DETAILED VISION FOR TOWN CENTRES

Common Weal has produced detailed work on all of the above issues and this can be found through the references. These have been brought together in a single document in Resilient Scotland which would be a good place to start in better understanding the Common Weal vision for the future of towns.

QUESTIONS FOR CALL FOR VIEWS

1 What are the challenges and opportunities facing town centres in Scotland and how should these be addressed?

Scotland as a whole must reconfigure our entire economy to rebuild from the current pandemic crisis and to prepare for the coming climate emergency. A Resilient Economy could build our town centres into the beating hearts of our communities – a place to go to be a part of society, to build and make things, to reach the services we need and to meet our friends and family. They should not simply be seen as a place for commuters to spend their wages in the few hours they have between shifts.

2 What are the barriers to developing town centres suitable for their communities and how can these be removed?

The barriers are almost entirely political in nature. The lack of democratic control over our own town centres can be addressed through a proper system of local democracy; the high levels of vacant lots coupled with high land and property prices can be controlled via the measures outlined above; support to transition economies away from disposable consumerism towards sustainable Circular principles is mainly political and regulatory in nature.

3 To what extent has the Town Centre Action Plan (TCAP) delivered against its stated ambitions? In what areas has delivery been successful? In what areas is there room for progress and/or barriers to overcome?

Ultimately, the TCAP's objectives were set before the 'climate emergency' was declared and before

the current pandemic and its implications for our society were made apparent. Therefore even if TCAP meets all of its concrete objectives it will almost certainly fall short of the changes required to meet the demands facing Scotland over the next 25 years.

4 To what extent are the stated objectives and policy challenges TCAP seeks to address relevant for the new challenges for our towns?

The principles of TCAP are broad enough that most plans suitable for addressing the current challenges would also include them. The vibrancy of town centres is important, the health of town centres should indeed feature in decision-making processes and decisions about town centres should be open, measured and transparent. Any issues not stemming from the problem of insufficiency as outlined in answer 3 largely come from the top-down nature of governance in Scotland. Not only should decisions be open and transparent when they are considered, they should be made *by* communities and *imposed on* them. Scotland's lack of local democracy may lead to resentment and lack of engagement in even broadly beneficial policies backed by TCAP.

5 If TCAP were to be revised, what additional or replacement areas and objectives would you recommend should be included and how should these be addressed?

As stated in 3, TCAP does not adequately address the coming challenges of the climate emergency nor will it necessarily result in a Resilient economy that meets stated Wellbeing goals. Almost all of Scotland's strategic frameworks – including TCAP – should be extensively revised in light of the climate emergency even if it results in their total replacement. Any framework that would result in Scotland not being Green New Deal compliant by 2045 is insufficient.

6 Can you provide details and contacts of any examples of excellent practice in town centres which you believe have wider potential?

The 'Preston Model' is now the world leading example of local wealth building via town centre management and its lessons should be implemented across Scotland with urgency. Other models of aspects of Common Weal's Resilience plan already exist in Scotland (such as Edinburgh's The Melting Pot for co-working offices or Glasgow's Jangling Space for maker workshops as well as various tool libraries around the country) and merely need the political support to be replicated more widely. Scotland's local democratic deficit is unique in Europe with almost all countries having a fully-empowered local democratic tier underneath their tiers of Regional and National government (those which are small enough to only require two tiers of government generally dispense with the Regional tier rather than the Local one as Scotland has)

7 Is there anything else you would like to add?

The Committee is encouraged to read Common Weal's Resilient Scotland plan in full for more details of how the Towns aspects mesh with the broader strategy. <https://commonweal.scot/resilience>

Further details of Common Weal's Green New Deal proposals can be found in the Common Home Plan. <https://commonweal.scot/policy-library/common-home-plan>

A blueprint for a Scottish local democracy can be found in our paper Development Councils. <https://commonweal.scot/policy-library/development-councils-proposal-new-system-local-democracy-scotland>

Common Weal has published a blueprint for the better integration of housing within town centres which can be read here: <https://commonweal.scot/policy-library/housekeeping-scotland-discussion-paper-outlining-new-agenda-housing>

REFERENCES

1. Common Weal, "The Common Home Plan", November 2019
2. Common Weal, "Resilient Scotland", June 2020
3. R McAlpine, L Pearson and C Dalzell, "Development Councils", October 2018
4. Common Weal, "Resilience Economics; an economic model for Scotland's recovery", June 2020
5. World Bank, "Who on Earth Can Work From Home?", July 2020
6. C Dalzell, "Good Houses for All", Common Weal, May 2020
7. Resource Efficient Scotland, "How to Save Money and Energy on Space Heating", February 2016