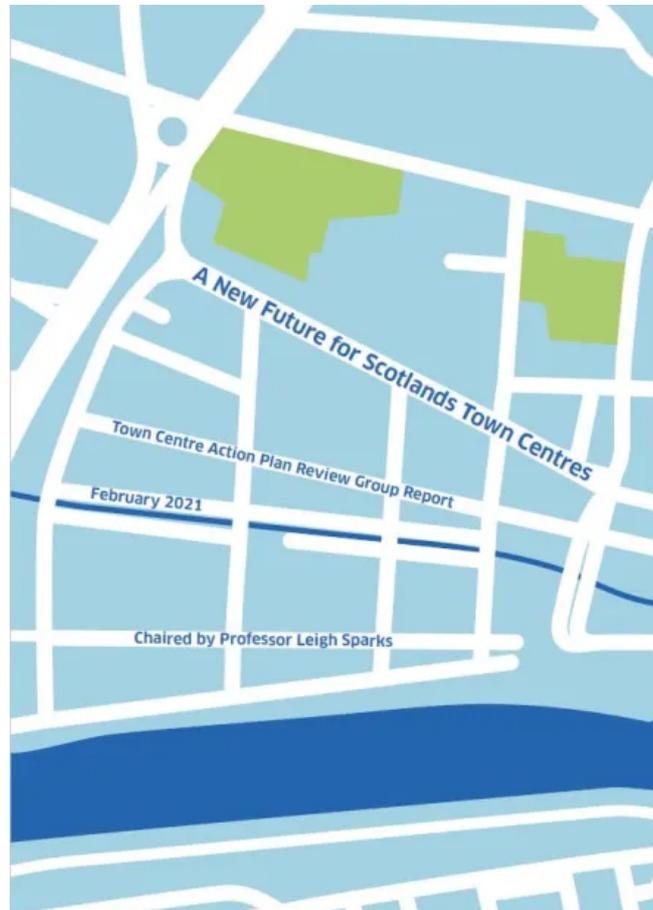


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Comments on retail issues from Leigh Sparks, the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling

A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres – (1) Introduction to our Report

Posted on February 3, 2021 by Leigh Sparks



Full Report can be downloaded [here](#)

This is the first of three linked posts on the Town Centre Action Plan Review Group Report (an introduction, summary of the review approach, recommendations). The full report and details of the Review Group, evidence submitted and heard and background and other material can be found at www.futuretowns.scot

In July 2020, I was asked by the Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Communities, Aileen Campbell MSP to Chair a Review Group considering the Town Centre Action Plan and activities to support towns since 2013. [The background to the Review, as well as the remit, have been covered previously in this blog](#). The Group was asked specifically to consider how Scotland's towns could be made greener, healthier, more equitable and inclusive places.

In publishing the Review Group's Report today, a number of thanks are in order : to the Review Group members for their time, input and energy; all the individuals and organisations who provided background material and written and oral evidence; and the support team and secretariat for keeping this focused and on schedule.

I fully appreciate that not all those who inputted will necessarily recognise their contributions and some will feel either their interests have not been taken into account or that we have not gone far enough to meet their desires. But in coming to our recommendations we were guided by the national need (as articulated in the National Outcomes) and by the task we were set by the Cabinet Secretary.

Towns are beginning to get the focus that require. Commitments to new approaches (The Place Principle, Community Wealth Building, 20 minute Neighbourhoods) and the Place Based Investment Programme provide a different and supportive context. We have the strong background and development since 2013 on which to build as well. We need though, and can, strengthen further the policy background and support for towns, and this is the first of our recommendations.

Even with this though, there is an inherent problem. We could spend hundreds of millions, if not billions, supporting town centres (and the “high street”). Yet, our system is often biased towards out-of-town and away from town centre activities, often reinforcing inequalities and emphasising private transport. If we are serious about supporting town centres to meet their potential and the national need, then these anomalies must be tackled. We need to make Town Centre First work if we are to change the future to be greener, healthier and more equitable and inclusive. Our second recommendation is therefore a number of actions to rebalance the playing field and to support town centres and withdraw active support for out of town activities. These are not easy issues and are arguably the more controversial aspects of our report (revised rates system, VAT revisions, digital tax, out-of-town car parking space levy, moratorium on out-of-town development). These are difficult issues, but they are the key to addressing the problem, and just because they are difficult does not mean that they can be ignored or postponed if our motivation is to truly turn around our town centres.

Then, thirdly, we need further and local initiatives to deliver the changes required from the local ground up. New approaches to town living, digital skills and use in towns, enterprising communities and climate change response in towns are needed urgently. We know some of things that work, but there are so many avenues that can be explored further locally, to meet local circumstances and to involve and engage the local community from the outset. These initiatives will help us focus on meeting disadvantage, reducing inequality and building locally sustainable and resilient economies and societies, including through strengthened local, community and co-operative enterprises. Much of this can align with initiatives on the environment, well-being, sustainability and new jobs.

The best of our towns and town centres provide a sustainable local economy and society with diverse and mixed uses attracting and meeting the needs and desires of their local communities. They are places that enhance a sense of community, identity and engagement and include and reflect all members of society. They are so much more than a focus for retailing, as important as that can be.

Towns and town centres can deliver many of the ambitions for Scotland and its people. They can only do this however if they focus around the specific needs of their local communities and ensure all community voices are engaged in developments. Town centres can be places we can be proud of and which provide social, economic, cultural, creative, environmental, entrepreneurial and local opportunities for all citizens. This can be done, but we need to prioritise, support and actively rethink what we want in our town centres and show how this removes inequalities of place and identity and enhances the wellbeing of all those that live in and use them. We believe our recommendations, if adopted, will help on this journey and will result in greener, healthier, fairer and more successful town centres.

Associated posts: (2) [Summary of the review approach](#) and (3) [Recommendations](#)

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About Leigh Sparks

I am Professor of Retail Studies at the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling, where I research and teach aspects of retailing and retail supply chains, alongside various colleagues. I am Chair of Scotland's Towns Partnership. I am also a Deputy Principal of the University, with responsibility for Education and Students.

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8 Responses to A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres – (1) Introduction to our Report



Gordon Bell says:

February 3, 2021 at 12:38

Have not managed to read the whole report, though it sounds as if we are coming from the right direction and perhaps willing to accept some truths that have been apparent for some time.

We do still need to be strategic, plan, have a vision and have goal, however no longer from those with influence and the money but now from the bottom up, from the community. We are beginning to understand the power of local and the sense of our place. Our old town centres and high streets were physical and geographic, created by the investors for their commercial gain, they did, however, give a service. I like to think our towns and communities will in the future have a heart and hubs, perhaps less defined with a more local and circular economy.

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