

Interim joint response to report and recommendations from the Review of the Town Centre Action Plan

‘A New Future for Scotland’s Town Centres’

March 2021



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Summary response

The independent review of the Town Centre Action Plan 2013 commissioned by the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government was published on 3 February 2021. This is an interim high level joint response to the review from the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government and COSLA represented by Councillor Steven Heddle the COSLA Spokesperson for Environment and Economy.

We welcome the [report and recommendations](#) of the Town Centre Review Group published on 3 February 2021. We strongly support its overarching aim to work with our communities to transform the future of our town centres, help us recover and learn from the impact of the pandemic and realise the necessary economic, environmental and social wellbeing benefits. We support the vision the review has developed and are determined to work collaboratively using this report to help us to achieve that vision. We will re-affirm our commitment to the Town Centre First Principle and the Place Principle starting now by engaging with partners to ask them to do the same.

To do that, we propose this report and its recommendations are considered in detail with partners and work is carried out collaboratively to prepare a shared delivery plan by autumn 2021. This will require significant analysis and consultation, some of which is already underway, such as through the preparation of National Planning Framework 4. In the interim, Local Government and Scottish Government will work together, with partners and with communities, to continue the work already started to support the delivery of the town centre vision, building on the strong foundations we already have. And we will continue to deliver shorter term actions both for recovery and longer term sustainability.

Our towns and town centres are the places where people and communities live, work and relax and therefore where a wide range of policies and investments interconnect and interact. Towns are well placed to contribute to a wide range of national ambitions locally and to support recovery and renewal. This includes shared ambitions on net zero, environment, well-being economy, community wealth building,

public health, inequalities and inclusion, transport, ambitions of housing 2040 and more. We are committed to continuing and developing our agreed place-based approach to ensure that town centres can deliver for our communities the town centre vision and all that supports.

Irrespective of the challenges and changing context, the future success of our towns is dependent on collaborative partnership working that responds to the local assets, aspirations and needs of all of the people and communities that live and work in them.

The Town Centre Action Plan 2013 and our town centre first approach have been held up as an example throughout the UK and globally. These have been built on a strong partnership with COSLA and local government. We want to build on that partnership and have agreed to work together to deliver the Place Based Investment Programme, which will link and align our place-based funding initiatives and provide a coherent local framework across urban and rural areas towards realising our ambitions for place, town centres, and 20 minute neighbourhoods.

This Programme will be backed by £325 million over 5 years to help create places across Scotland where we are able to live well locally and we have vibrant town centres with the facilities, services, opportunities and connections we need to flourish. This programme is being delivered in partnership with COSLA with £38 million to be allocated to local authorities in 2021/22 and a further £33 million in 2022/23.

The report and its recommendations merit careful consideration by all those with an interest in the future of their towns, and we and our partners look forward to embracing the opportunity to shape the vibrant, healthy, green, fair towns and town centres our communities deserve.

Background

In July 2020 the Scottish Government established a Review Group, chaired by Professor Leigh Sparks to collaboratively review the progress and scope of the Town Centre Action Plan 2013 and develop a vision for the future of towns and the means to deliver that vision.

The review was commissioned to provide Government and partners with an opportunity to rethink and re-energise our efforts to develop town centres and towns that meet the diverse social, economic and environmental needs of our communities. The Review group were also asked to advise on how to adapt the Programme for Government commitment for 20 minute neighbourhoods for our cities, towns, rural and island communities.

The report describes how our towns and town centres have changed and how that has been impacted by and impacted upon the people and communities that live, work and enjoy being there. It describes the current circumstances highlighted by the impact of the pandemic and provides a context for the challenges faced in our towns and town centres. It outlines the policy, strategies and frameworks that have evolved in Scotland and poses a number of challenging propositions to all those interested in the future success of our towns and town centres.

The review group recommends a vision for towns and town centres “*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 their own town and town centre successful*”. This new vision takes wider wellbeing outcomes into account and the report sets out recommendations to achieve this.

Impact of Covid-19 pandemic

The last year has been unprecedented, the global pandemic and resulting lockdowns have created and exacerbated inequalities and socio economic and wellbeing harms across the world, and this has been evident in many of Scotland’s towns. We agree with the report that Covid has accelerated some trends and prompted changes in behaviour and the way that people and communities interact and connect with their towns.

The crisis has given us an opportunity to radically rethink the towns and town centres we live, work and enjoy spending time in. We want to ensure that our communities can become vibrant hubs for the people who live there – to work, shop, learn, keep active and share cultural and social experiences. For some the experience of

lockdown showed that their lives could be improved through active travel, exercise, access to local services including those provided online, working from or closer to home, and access to shared greener spaces. It has highlighted some of the assets of our communities, encouraging closer relationships between people, communities and local services, providing opportunities for collaboration, community wealth building and also reducing commuting with related environmental benefits. This report and its recommendations will help us in addressing challenges and building on some of the positives we have seen this year.

We are building on strong foundations

In Scotland we have strong foundations upon which to build, the 2012 National Review of Town Centres and the subsequent 2013 Town Centre Action Plan have been augmented by the development of our National Performance Framework which established our shared purpose, values and National Outcomes with indicators designed to measure progress.

The 2013 Town Centre Action Plan established the Town Centre First Principle, the Place Principle, and more recently, our ambitions for 20 minute neighbourhoods have further promoted the importance of towns and town centres as the sites where place based approaches can be used to improve a broad range of outcomes for people, communities and businesses.

We welcome the opportunity the report offers to re-emphasise and deliver the Town Centre First and Place Principle. We re-affirm our commitment to these principles supported by our joint place-based investment programme which will help deliver better outcomes for our communities and towns through greater collaboration and more investment.

Current context for response

The Review group worked speedily in difficult circumstances to finalise the report which was published on 3 February. We are very grateful to the group and to all those who contributed to the oral and written evidence.

This collaborative independent report has been published only a few months before the Scottish Parliamentary Elections, due in May 2021. The recommendations and comments in the report are in many cases far reaching long-term aims and ambitions, which will benefit from wide ranging consideration.

As there is insufficient time remaining in this parliamentary term for the current government to give full and due consideration to the recommendations in the report, this responsibility will fall to the next government following the May elections. It will be for the next government to consider and prioritise with COSLA and other partners what actions can be taken in response. This includes how to address those propositions which are not within the control of the Scottish Government.

This joint interim response does not and cannot address if and/or how each of the propositions will be taken forward, but we can at this stage declare the support of COSLA and the current Scottish Government's for the ambition and innovation of the report. We would expect all of the recommendations in the report to be revisited following the formation of the new government and, in due course, by COSLA, in line with its positions on town centres, climate change and the place principle. Both COSLA and Scottish Government are committed to working with our partners in taking the report forward. Alongside this joint response Scottish Government is publishing a document which sets out actions already underway which will support the delivery of some of the recommendations of the report and some related high level responses.

Neither towns nor this report exist in isolation and it will be important to consider how the report sits with existing policies and more recent developments such as the Climate Change Plan update, the Infrastructure Investment Plan, the Advisory Group on Economic recovery report, the Social Renewal Advisory Board report, the Housing 2040 report and others currently in development, such as the Retail Strategy, work on city centre recovery and National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). Our ambition is to ensure an overarching strategic direction for our towns and town centres that is coherent, complementary and aligned, that does not duplicate or replicate work underway, nor put unnecessary additional administrative burdens on partners that inhibit our ability to make the locally agreed improvements identified.

A joint response - Collaborative partnership working

From the outset we have agreed to shape this response jointly as a Scottish Government – COSLA collaboration. This follows from joint participation on the review group and on publication of the report COSLA that: *“Towns are at the heart of local authorities the length and breadth of Scotland and it is to the benefit of the communities and businesses who call them home that they achieve their full potential.”*

As the report notes, crucial to the continued success of our towns will be an ability to remain agile and adaptable as new opportunities present themselves and new challenges emerge. Irrespective of the challenge, what will continue to be necessary for the success of our towns and communities will be collaboration and partnership across government and beyond. Scottish Government and our partners have adopted a collaborative place based approach which we want to develop. This seeks to improve wellbeing outcomes, particularly with and for those experiencing disadvantage.

Success won't look the same in every town because the setting, history and context for towns and town centres isn't the same everywhere. The assets and opportunities which exist will vary. What remains the same regardless of setting is that collaborative partnership working which acts upon a shared vision remains crucial to the future success of our towns and the improvements we seek with and for the communities that live, work and enjoy being there.



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