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# SURF RESPONSE TO TOWN CENTRE ACTION PLAN EXPERT REVIEW GROUP

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## Background

In June 2020, the Scottish Government announced the formation of an experts' panel to advise its policy on town centres and high streets in the context of COVID-19 pandemic impacts.

The panel is chaired by Leigh Sparks of Scotland's Towns Partnership and reports to Aileen Campbell, Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government. Other panel members include representatives from the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland, the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland, and Public Health Scotland.

The Scottish Government describe the objective of the panel as follows:

*“Diverse views from urban, town, rural and island communities must be heard if town centres are to be revitalised and renewed in the wake of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic... Experts in town planning, public health, transport, and business will take on board views of local communities to build on the progress of the Scottish Government’s 2013 Town Centre Action Plan.”*

SURF was a member of the External Advisory Group that informed the 2013 Town Centre Action Plan and welcomed an invitation from the 2020 Expert Review Group to participate in a call for written evidence and oral evidence on the following themes:

- Retail and Commercial
- Climate and Sustainability
- Planning, Access & Place Management
- Culture and Creative
- Housing and Property
- Local Government and Economic Agencies
- Communities, Wellbeing and Inclusion

SURF's response to selected questions set by the Expert Review Group follows.

## SURF's Response

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

As Scotland's Regeneration Forum, SURF was a member of the External Advisory Group, chaired by Malcolm Fraser, which informed the development of the 2013 Town Centre Action Plan.

The Action Plan was based on a central argument that town centres should rebalance an existing dependence on conventional commercial activity towards more mixed use functions, such as public service hubs, town centre housing and community led initiatives, among others.

As the recessionary outcomes of the pandemic are unfolding, this important argument becomes even stronger, and there is an increased onus on town centre stakeholders from all sectors to do more to implement the 2013 recommendations. Many economically challenged town centres will be faced with an even greater excess supply of commercial premises, as some shops, offices, restaurants and more will not be able to reopen and there will be low appetite from new businesses to take on their leases.

Shelter Scotland's Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, pop-up marketplaces, cultural amenities, community led activity and relocation of civic services show there is not a shortage of ideas, advice and support to put unused town centre units to good use. The ultimate outcome of an enhanced mixed use balance will be more sustainable town centres, absent of empty buildings but full of life, while alleviating a wide range of physical, social, economic and environmental problems.

Other challenges remain around accessibility. In many medium and large towns, town centres are somewhat cut off from local neighbourhoods, with declining bus routes, poor urban connectivity and lack of car parking putting residents off from visiting more regularly. There is a much-increased policy appetite for a modal shift in transport usage towards increasing walking and cycling, and many town centres in Scotland could benefit from consideration of new or improved routes and infrastructure. Similar urban design improvements to town squares, street furniture and pavement quality would also encourage more people to engage with their town centres.

Some positive opportunities lie in the increased engagement many local residents have had with their local towns during the pandemic. Many people who live in a town but work in a city, will have had more time to get to know their local town centres while working from home, or being placed on furlough. In the post-pandemic era, many organisations will encourage or allow their staff to regularly work from home. This may help increase social and economic activity in town centres, and provide a more favourable balance compared with that in city centres and out-of-town shopping centres.

Young people, in particular, are demonstrating particular enthusiasm towards small local operators such as arts & crafts ventures, independent bakeries, coffee shops, and wellbeing centres. There is scope for town centres to build on these connections and sustain the closer relationships that have developed during the pandemic.

A further opportunity concerns the volume of derelict and vacant land in Scottish town centres, and there is informed speculation that this is set to increase substantially with reduced demand for vacant commercial premises and offices. A third of the population live within 500m of a derelict site and there is evidence that it contributes to poor mental wellbeing, discourages public and business investment and reduces local pride of place.

SURF is a member of the Vacant and Derelict Land Task Force, which is set to formally report a series of policy recommendations to the Scottish Government later in 2020. The Review Group may wish to look at amplifying these recommendations, as fresh efforts to help bring vacant land and buildings back into productive reuse will be of particular benefit to town centres.

As the Scottish Government's Connected Scotland strategy acknowledged in 2018, social isolation is a significant and growing problem in Scotland. It states, "towns and high streets should act as a focal

point for social interactions”. There is an opportunity to align town centre and social isolation policy agendas through actions such as town square events where residents are encouraged to meet new people, and creating better designed public spaces, green spaces and street furniture to help town centres become more valuable as social meeting points.

SURF would also like to see a stronger targeting of town centre improvements in the most deprived places in Scotland, which are most in need of external interventions.

***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?***

SURF has good evidence of the ‘Town Centre First’ principle in action. SURF, with support from the Scottish Government and in partnership with Scotland’s Towns Partnership and Architecture & Design Scotland, has operated a ‘Scotland’s Most Improved Place’ category in the SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration each year since 2015. It has highlighted towns such as Barrhead, Irvine and Kilmarnock, where collaborative partnerships have explicitly worked to TCAP principles, including relocating local government staff to town centre bases.

TCAP has demonstrated value by encouraging focused action on its six key themes, and a generally raised profile of the potential of town centre regeneration, which has led to pilot projects, funding programmes and enhanced support for new bodies including Improvement Districts, developments which otherwise might not have taken place. For example, SURF has managed a successful pilot digital towns activity in Rothesay, and helped advise the distribution of funding for a national Town Centre Communities Capital Fund in 2015, both of which were productive TCAP initiatives.

There is general room for progress in further implementation. While many stakeholders are aware of TCAP, and supportive of its general thrust, there is a danger that it is not leading to enough by way of practical delivery. It is often remarked that Scotland is not lacking in strategies, and the Review Group may wish to focus more attention on how to enhance the implementation of the original TCAP objectives, rather than create and promote a separate new strategy, which may not be necessary.

There is a wider context of competing strategies and priorities, and a lack of resources, which local authorities and other regeneration players who wish to drive TCAP aspirations must deal with. One solution may lie in a scaling up of town centre focused investment programmes, such as the Town Centre Fund and Regeneration Capital Grant Fund, that can lead to improved prioritisation and project delivery, and build momentum for strategic collaborations.

The SURF network is keen on Community Charrettes and similar processes for setting and working to a town centre vision with a sharp focus on understanding community demand and being realistic about project delivery options. One policy challenge is, what comes behind Charrettes? In some places there is a skilled partnership in place to take things forward, in others a well-executed Charrette process is not carried forward to delivery. Is there a solution in which a funding award for a Charrette or a similar can be packaged with a follow-up resource to deliver a ‘quick win’ and build momentum?

An additional key barrier to progress is the general challenge in applying town centre policies to the unique local complexities and practical difficulties, such as disengaged property owners, competing interests around particular sub-geographies, legal challenges, local politics and personality clashes, that may exist in a particular high street.

SURF’s Alliance for Action programme, a place-based initiative supported by the Scottish Government, supports regeneration activity in town centres including Dunoon, Govan and Langholm. The deeper our understanding of a specific town centre, the more we appreciate the challenge of implementing standard policy aspirations across major differences in assets, challenges, personnel and structures in a distinctive place.

There is scope for a better understanding of these different local dynamics, perhaps through a dedicated series of case studies and workshops that shine a light on the less obvious challenges facing a contemporary Scottish town centre, and how these can be approached.

Finally, SURF recently produced profiles of how its member organisations are responding to the pandemic. We gathered more than 150 of them across the country and produced a learning outcomes report; a link follows below. One of the most notable shared messages was how straightforward it has reportedly been to set up local collaborations during the pandemic.

Community groups, housing associations, Councils and others with a difficult mixed experience of working together in the past suddenly found it easy and hugely useful to form a close alliance. Can we sustain this level of partnership working beyond the crisis?

SURF 'Lessons from the Frontline' Link: [www.surf.scot/projects/building-back-better/showcasing-community-resilience/](http://www.surf.scot/projects/building-back-better/showcasing-community-resilience/)

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

Yes – especially through our 'Scotland's Most Improved Place' SURF Awards category, which has profiled 12 initiatives that have been shortlisted in the past five years (a further three for the 2020 process will be announced in November). A selection are highlighted below.

**Fort William** (Highland) – Shortlisted, 2018 SURF Awards

Like many High Streets in Scotland, Fort William's has declined in the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the back of changing consumer habits and declining investment. This led to physical deterioration, with disused and rundown premises making it a much less attractive place in the eyes of residents and visitors. In 2014, a Community Charrette was organised to change this narrative, and an organic Town Team formed to lead on delivery.

With support from Highland Council and other relevant stakeholders, the Town Team has completely refurbished the High Street, creating attractive public squares, shop fronts, street furniture and accessible streets. New links have been created between the High Street, the West Highland Way and the waterfront, with a community marina created to enable access from cruise ships – the first such visit took place in 2018. The initiative is a living demonstration of TCAP principles, with abandoned office spaces converted into town centre housing and relocated public services.

**Irvine** (North Ayrshire) – Winner, 2017 SURF Awards

The large town of Irvine has faced significant deprivation and depopulation challenges in the post-industrial era. Since North Ayrshire Council's development of an Irvine Vision plan in 2015 to strategically halt and reverse economic and physical decline, the town centre has benefited from a series of large-scale investment to address key challenges identified in extensive local consultation.

The former district court, Irvine Townhouse, was reopened alongside new leisure facilities; extensive public realm works were undertaken; Trinity Church was redeveloped; and investment in the i3 site and other business bases have improved access to employment opportunities in the town. The SURF Awards judges commented on the pride of community partners in the progress that has been made, and reported that the combined regeneration activities have had a transformative effect on the town centre, improving its image and value for visitors, business and residents alike.

**New Cumnock** (East Ayrshire) – Shortlisted, 2019 SURF Awards

New Cumnock is a small ex-mining town that has long struggled with the legacy of deindustrialisation and geographic isolation. A 2014-2019 Action Plan – delivered in a comprehensive partnership including East Ayrshire Council, local businesses and community groups – established a Development Trust in the town and delivered a host of positive changes built around much-needed physical improvements.

The town centre was transformed; among other investments, it created attractive green spaces, a historic Town Hall renovated into a thriving community hub, and a renovated outdoor swimming pool, the only heated freshwater pool in the country. The independent SURF Awards judging panel were particularly impressed with the depth of engagement with local residents and the long-term, ‘whole-place’ nature of the Action Plan.

Further details, including project manager contact information, are available in dedicated annual publications that are freely available on the SURF website at the following link. The other shortlisted entries are also showcased in these publications:

*SURF Awards Project Profiles Link: [www.surf.scot/surf-awards/awards-by-year/](http://www.surf.scot/surf-awards/awards-by-year/)*

In addition, SURF focuses on winning and shortlisted projects in a series of ‘transferable learning’ SURF Awards workshops, which take place six months on from the conclusion of an annual process. The question we ask of successful projects is, “what can other places and initiatives learn from your successes and failures?” We would be happy to share details of ‘Most Improved Place’ workshop outcomes upon request.

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### **End of SURF’s Response**

Derek Rankine, Policy Manager, August 2020

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