

Scottish Government Town Centre Review

A summary of contributions by Carnegie UK

In September 2012, the Carnegie UK Trust was pleased to participate in the opening symposium for the Scottish Government's Town Centre Review process. Held in Kilmarnock, the symposium drew together leaders from a range of commercial, governmental and civil society backgrounds to consider the challenges facing Scottish town communities.

Chaired by leading Scottish architect Malcolm Fraser and reporting to Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, the Review promises a radically honest and open examination of the causes of town centre decline and a commitment to an innovative programme of work to reverse the trend.

Carnegie UK has a long heritage of policy research and practical investment in community resilience, socioeconomic wellbeing, the social value of enterprise and innovation, and the importance of town centres to the fabric of life across the UK. The Trust was pleased to contribute some ideas, drawn from its own research and project work, to help with the building of a substantive reform agenda for Scotland's towns.

1. Understanding how towns are performing needs better and broader comparative data

Measuring the assets, productivity, social capital and economic performance of different towns is difficult. The data is patchy, and tends to over focus on core employment and retail vacancy statistics. To help communities and policymakers think more strategically about towns regeneration, better data is needed to give a 'whole town' picture of our communities – areas like citizen wellbeing and pride in place, the size and impact of the voluntary sector, innovation and social capital created by educational and social institutions all need to be measured and reported better.

2. As the public and commercial sectors decline in towns, civil society needs to take a more strategic role and build better partnerships

Large commercial players are withdrawing from Scottish high streets as consumer habits change and private spending tightens. Similarly, the ability of the public sector to bridge the gap, at a time of fiscal austerity, is diminishing. This creates both a challenge and a responsibility for civil society groups to work together more effectively in town-centred networks, to find new ways of delivering localised services and finding smarter uses for civic space.

3. Harnessing the enterprising spirit of younger people is key to town centre recovery

The Trust's 'Enterprising Minds' research into student views about the economy found many younger people associate enterprise and innovation with metropolitan centres, the media, high fashion and extreme wealth. They increasingly disconnect local town centres from their aspirations as future workers and wealth generators. Younger entrepreneurs are the pathway to younger consumers and service users – only they understand the products and facilities offering a town will need to appeal to the next generation. Towns, educators, entrepreneurs and policymakers need to work harder together to help younger people with entrepreneurial spark see towns as innovation hubs and vibrant hosts, open for business.

4. Restructuring transport flows can help more people spend more time in towns, rather than speeding around and out of them

In too many towns, road systems are still designed for past congestion and traffic flow problems. The result today can be underused pedestrianised centres ringed by high speed one way systems, making it harder for drivers to see shop fronts and stop to access them. By lowering speed limits in town centres where possible, removing one way 'race tracks' and expanding multi-use transport routes with bikes, cars and pedestrians equally respected, more potential customers could circulate around town centres, helping more vacant spaces to once again find a use.

5. Improving the look and feel of transport gateways can restore pride and interest among locals and visitors

Our strategic transport system – both road and rail – channels passengers through key gateway points into town centres. How these gateways look, if they are well presented or if they are dilapidated wastelands, communicates a strong message to travellers about the cohesion and pride of a community and its visitor offering. All sectors, along with strategic transport managers, should work together to refresh and manage key gateways to better communicate their town's vision and identity. Similarly, key assets like underused railway stations should be made available for innovative uses as social enterprise hubs or popup retail opportunities.

6. Helping town communities to do things for themselves takes courage from civic leaders

Increasingly, many areas of civic life – from managing public spaces to providing some community services – will be beyond the budgetary capabilities of local or central authorities. When citizens clamour for action and resources, key civic actors will need to design community solutions and social partnerships for delivery, rather than simply escalate issues through government as they did in the past. This will be politically challenging, requiring new and complex community development skills. Politicians, civil servants and local civil society leaders will need to be better supported and trained to act as community empowerment agents to meet this new town centre challenge.

The Carnegie UK Trust is committed to supporting the Town Centre Review and Scotland's towns in the months and years ahead, and welcomes discussions with other organisations and localities similarly interested in innovative partnerships and solutions. For more information, contact Jim Metcalfe at jim@carnegieuk.org, 01383 721445 or 07828243899. Recent Carnegie UK Trust reports include those below - click the image to view via our website.



Pride in Place



Enterprising Minds



Exploring Community Resilience



Rural Broadband