How do you get the life back into Scotland’s high streets? Graham + Sibbald Associate Peter Fleming talks revitalisation.

It’s a sad truth that for the last 20 years the Scottish high street has been in decline as a place to live, shop and work. This has happened in tandem with the development of out-of-town retail, leisure and office parks and, more recently, with the explosive growth of online retail. In general, people and businesses have moved further out of the town, often driven out by rising property prices. Covid-19 has added further pressure, hurting landlords and retailers across the country.

This means that almost all Scottish towns are now facing the challenge of reinvigorating themselves as somewhere where people want to visit, live and work again. So how do you do it? It’s not an easy question, particularly now that the ‘old’ answer — retail — is no longer valid.
Attracting people into the centre
Some towns already have a ‘big hook’ to help keep them bustling and vibrant. For example, St. Andrew’s University fills the town centre with students and the shops and cafes that cater to them. Having a big employer is also a great boon. For example, when the BBC moved into Finnieston, near Glasgow, the company attracted a whole swathe of new people to the neighbourhood, which re-invigorated and regenerated the whole area.

But what of towns that don’t have these advantages? Answers lie in making town centre life more attractive by providing better and greener amenities and services. These might include parks and community spaces, cycle routes, public transport, EV-charging points, bike racks and cutting-edge IT infrastructure. The latter will attract people from the countryside, where the broadband isn’t so good and their home-working needs are not met. Making towns greener may also help to attract new residents, who will benefit from not having to own a car and from lower bills due to the provision of more energy efficient homes and shared utilities and amenities.

Bringing back the workers
Attracting workers into the high street can be done by providing flexible office space for businesses and the self-employed, alongside creating collaborative working environments for small businesses to work alongside each other, network and share resources – meeting rooms, admin etc.

To provide the space for all this to happen, planners and developers will need to champion true mixed-use schemes that provide a hybrid of apartments and homes, retail and community spaces alongside the vital amenities and green space that will draw people in.

And what of shops?
Although retail will not take the leading role it has in the past, it is still important. But how do you overcome the barriers that are stopping people setting up new shops? Here I think the lead needs to come from local councils — and not just in the form of tax and other financial breaks. One approach would be for them to use the local government covenant to cover the risks for landlords. Local government might also take long leases on town-centre properties and then sublet them back to small-scale enterprises.

The exciting thing is that a revitalised town centre can act as a real community focus, which will pull people into towns and help address problems of social isolation that the pandemic has highlighted and made worse. This means that any meaningful revitalisation plan will have to involve the local community — this is no easy matter as in any town centre there is a wide range of people who will have to be consulted and a wide range of perspectives that will have to be taken into account.

How Graham + Sibbald can help
At Graham + Sibbald, we are well positioned to help with many aspects of this challenge — our services cover financial, planning, architecture and many other town centre issues. We work with many of the stakeholders who will provide the ‘life’ to Scotland’s revitalised town centres and are ready and able to help local governments, businesses and property developers capitalise on the opportunities that lie ahead.

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For more details of how G+S can help your business, contact Peter Fleming:

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