

Cross-Party Group on Towns and Town Centres, Town Centre Living: A Catalyst for Change

Monday 4th December 2023, 12.30 -13.30

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Meghan Gallacher MSP
Katy Clark MSP

Invited guests

Kimberley Guthrie	Scotland's Towns Partnership
Mhairi Donaghy	Scottish Futures Trust
Alan Glasgow	Dumfries & Galloway Housing Partnership, Wheatley Homes South
Alasdair Morrison	Renfrewshire Council

Non-MSP Group Members

Alan Anthony, Threesixty Architecture
Peter Atkinson, East Dunbartonshire Council
Elaine Bone, Scotland's Towns Partnership
Hollie Bruce, Scotland's Towns Partnership
Trish Connolly, Scottish Borders Council
Andy Corletto, Glasgow City Council
Andrew Docherty, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
Mhairi Donaghy, Scottish Futures Trust
Tim Dring, Aberdeenshire Council
Jenny Dunlop, I Love Clarkston BID
Ewan Eccleston, Glasgow City Council
Graeme Finlay, Clackmannanshire Council
Alan Glasgow, Wheatley Homes South
Mel Greig, Aberdeenshire Council
Kimberley Guthrie, Scotland's Towns Partnership
Lucy Harding, Nairn BID
Julie Hogg, South of Scotland Enterprise
Nicola Hutchinson, Scotland's Towns Partnership
James Lafferty, Argyll and Bute Council
Semirah Lawal Abubakar, Aberdeenshire Council

James Little, Dumfries and Galloway Council
Jamie Mackie, Scottish Grocers' Federation
Rebecca Mather, Scotland's Towns Partnership
Paula McDonald, Dumfries and Galloway Council
Caroline Morrison, South Ayrshire Council
Alasdair Morrison, Renfrewshire Council
Andy Nicol, WEL Medical
Nairn Pearson, West Lothian Council
Jonathan Pickering, Glasgow City Council
Valerie Reid, Scottish Parliament
Chris Ringland, Evangelical Alliance Scotland
Aimee Roberts, Scottish Parliament
Sanne Roberts, Scottish Borders Council
Ruth Rodger, Smith Scott Mullan Associates
Iain Ross, South Lanarkshire Council
Jamie Shovelin, Dumfries & Galloway Chamber of Commerce
Alan Smillie, East Kilbride Shopping Centre
Leigh Sparks, Scotland's Towns Partnership
Christine Stewart, Smith Scott Mullan
Lucy Styles, Aberdeenshire Council
Kirsteen Sullivan, West Lothian Council
Christine Webster, Aberdeenshire Council
Carolyn Yates, Castle Douglas Development Forum

Apologies

Elaine Grant, Falkirk Delivers
Roz McCall MSP
Evelyn Tweed MSP

Agenda item 1

Welcome and Opening Remarks– Meghan Gallacher MSP

Convener Meghan Gallacher MSP welcomed all to the. She thanked all speakers, contributors, and those who have participated in this year's series of CPGs. She then noted that the meeting would focus on the topic of "Town Centre Living" in Scotland's towns.

Agenda item 2

Minute of last meeting and Matters Arising – Meghan Gallacher MSP, Convener

Minutes accepted. Proposed by Nicola and seconded by Kimberley Guthrie. There were no matters arising.

Agenda item 3

Overview: Kimberley Guthrie, Interim Chief Officer, Scotland's Towns Partnership

Town Centre Living is a key policy priority for Scottish Government, Local Government, Private, Public and Third Sector. Town centres are vital to our local communities in Scotland and town centre living enables people to live well locally. It can revitalise high streets, contribute to the wellbeing economy, cut carbon emissions, and support active travel commitments. But fundamentally, town centre living strategies can transform our local places by creating new businesses, growing existing businesses and ultimately connecting people to place.

However, we need to ensure that this is done in the right way, with the right homes, in the right places, for the right reasons. We have seen to date a mixed approach to town centre living. The town centre living report, driven by Scottish Futures Trust, Architecture & Design Scotland, and The Land Commission helps to address some of these complexities and barriers, but does it in such a way that we can recognise opportunity. Today's speakers will discuss all of the above and provide case studies of it in practice.

On behalf of Scottish Government, Scotland's Towns Partnership is working on a series of roadshows due to land February and March next year that will address a lot of the issues covered today. These road shows will be somewhere to share, learn and influence the next steps of a successful Town Centre Living strategy. Details for these road shows will be shared later this month.

Agenda item 4

Town Centre Living Report and Progress Update – Mhairi Donaghy, Associate Director, Scottish Futures Trust

Mhairi introduced the review of Town Centre Living. A working group was pulled together, including SFT, Architecture & Design Scotland, and Scottish Land Commission and together the group pulled together a report entitled, *More Homes at the Heart of Great Places* which is available on the Scottish Futures Trust website. The report began by looking at relevant policy. It was concluded that there's strong support across these various policies, including TCAP, Housing to 2040, Cities Task Force, NPF4 and NSET.

Town Centre Living has been shown to support the wellbeing economy, with people living in connected communities being happier, healthier, and with increased levels of satisfaction. Town centre living also contributes to net zero and climate change priorities given there's less car travel in connected communities, and there's opportunities for enabled investment due to higher populations of those living around urban centres.

Why is town centre living a benefit to the overall sense of place? Housing brings people, and people bring activity, animation, efficiency, spend, and resilience. And there are successful examples of these across Scotland. These examples range from small island communities to larger towns and city neighbourhoods. Examples

mentioned included, Falkirk Campbeltown, Paisley, Airdrie, Inverness, Dumbarton, Dumfries & Galloway, Perth & Kinross, North Ayrshire, and Alloa.

The work completed as part of the Town Centre Living Report generated five key outcomes: disseminate and amplify good practice, affordable living, not just affordable housing, understand demand an opportunity, understand the benefits and costs, and finally – TCL needs public sector support.

Mhairi reiterated Kimberley's point about roadshows taking place in 2024. These events will give a space to disseminate good practice, but also to gather more information from people in terms of what's happening. There is also likely to be one specifically dedicated to rural places. The data collected at these events and conversations had with stakeholders will be taken back to the town centres Forum, which is co-chaired by Scottish Government and COSLA and is trying to support more work in this area.

SFT are also monitoring the inclusive growth inclusive growth impacts from a series of infrastructure related investments in development, and four of them are focused on town centre living. Mhairi asked that if anyone knows of any innovative projects to please get in touch so that it can be added to the evidence base.

Agenda item 5

Case Study: Wheatley Group – Alan Glasgow, MD of Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership, Wheatley Homes South

Alan set the scene by providing some of the background to Wheatley Homes South's work in Dumfries & Galloway. Wheatley Homes is Scotland's second largest landlord with more than 10,000 homes across Dumfries & Galloway and aims to not only give people a home, but also support people back into work. Beyond that, the group have also been trying to support the local economy with their work, creating better neighbourhoods.

The five-year development programme aims to take the existing 175 new builds that have recently been delivered and expand that to over 1,000 new homes over the next five years. To this point, over £100m of investment has been made in existing and new homes since December 2019, over 200 jobs and training opportunities delivered, with 111 jobs created across the region.

In terms of creating jobs and opportunities, an exercise was carried out to bring together key stakeholders from across the region, including Dumfries & Galloway Council, the local College and RSL Housing Alliance. Together, the group were able to drive local recruitment across various housing projects (including recruitment of WHS customers) and support some of the local authority's other key priorities such as child poverty, and homelessness.

Agenda item 6

Case Study: Renfrewshire Council – Alasdair Morrison, Head of Economy and Development, Renfrewshire Council

Alasdair began by highlighting that historically, Scotland's town centres have always been associated with residential use and the opportunity for residential development clearly exists for many of them. He then posed a question: with this being the case, if we want it to happen, why doesn't it happen more often?

Paisley has always had a large residential population, that currently stands around 1,750 people within a ten-minute walk of the high street – a significant population compared to other towns in Scotland.

Across the regeneration journey that's spanned the last 20 years, the first project discussed was the Anchor Mills project of 2002 – 60 homes built within a derelict historic mill complex. Owned by a consortium of public and private sector organisations, £11million of funding was raised (public funds and private sector investment) to transform the mill into 60 luxury apartments, complete with car parking and a business level on the first floor.

The second project, the Elipta Building of 2008 was a former industrial site where 53 homes were built. The third, the former Arnotts Department Store which was a derelict site for the best part of a decade. The site is now completely transformed and houses 141 homes, including a new restaurant. Other examples included Westpoint Homes site, Abbey Place (180 homes), The Millhouse (34 homes) and finally the Paisley Centre Redevelopment which is underway and will bring 80 homes to the town centre. The challenge faced with this project is one that many town centres are going to face in the near and distant future, which is how do you develop out-of-use, purpose-built shopping malls.

Discussing the common denominators to the success of the examples given, Alasdair offered his view, was that these projects were opportunity led and necessity led, in that it was a conscious decision to change the use and fate of these sites which otherwise, would probably still be derelict today. Alasdair also highlighted that there also needs to be a group of willing participants, including housebuilders, local authority, private investor, Government, and financial support that incorporates funds from both private and public sector sources – a cocktail of funding.

Alasdair's offered a final three points that in his opinion will increase the number of future town centre developments. First, targeting a set proportion of ship funding to centrally located sites. This would be relatively easy to do and make a big difference although would undoubtedly cause upset in some places. Secondly, refurbishment projects to create residential space should be zero rated for VAT. This would have a direct impact on vacant town centre buildings, including those vacant upper floor residential units. Finally, some sort of incentive to both councils and private

developers to regenerate town centres. If we want more of it, we need to offer incentives that encourage people.

Agenda item 7

Discussion and Any Other Competent Business

The Deputy-convenor put questions out to attendees and asked if anyone would like to contribute to discussion.

M. Donaghy added that Scottish Futures Trust are currently working with private sector and councils who are looking at repurposing shopping centre facilities and unattractive office spaces for potential development. She noted that it will always be cheaper to build new homes outside of town centres, but the benefits are often not the same. SFT are therefore trying to highlight why this is a valuable opportunity and what the benefits are beyond just the base financials.

L. Sparks asked Alasdair to provide more detail on the use of ground floor units. Alasdair noted that if it's possible to 'activate' ground floor units in town centres and main thoroughfares by including retail or leisure, then it should be done to bring footfall into the area.

K. Sullivan introduced herself as a councillor in West Lothian with responsibility for town centres and community wealth building. She highlighted the issue of empty residential spaces above retail units, many of which are owned by absent landlords, leaving Councils with limited options. She posed the question to Alasdair: how do you best deal with private owners, of such units and for unused, derelict land and buildings. Are compulsory sales orders a potential means to tackling these problems?

K. Guthrie highlighted that she's included more information in the chat box, regarding the themes for the roadshows in 2024 in case they will build upon any questions posed.

A. Anthony added to the discussion on reuse, that in Glasgow there has to be statutory relaxation for any projects to be successful in future. He also added that in terms of an activated ground floor, it's hard to sell into housebuilders.

M. Donaghy explained that SFT are trying to identify potential ways forward when it comes to vacant residential units in town centres. She highlighted that Falkirk and Perth & Kinross council have been incredibly successful in this and there are case studies there to learn from. She also highlighted the need for flexibility in terms of policy related to such units and their development.

Agenda item 8

Close of meeting. The Deputy-convener thanked attendees and guest speakers for their valuable input. She added there's a lot of hope and positivity in this area where there are a number of acknowledged challenges that need to be addressed.

The meeting closed with a note that the date for the next meeting is still to be agreed.