

Age Scotland's response to the Call for Written Evidence on the Town Centre Action Plan

Expert Review Group, for the Scottish Government

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Scotland is going through a significant demographic shift, with a population that is ageing more rapidly than in other areas of the UK. Currently, 40% of the population is aged over 50 in Scotland. Over the next 20 years we are set to see this rise to 45%, and the highest percentage change will be in the number of over 75s, set to increase by 70%.¹

This demographic shift will have a considerable impact on the way that many people will expect to live, the public services that they will need and how they interact with their local community. If Scotland wishes to encourage healthy and active ageing among its population, then it is essential that investment is made now to help develop towns that are fit for purpose and the future.

Loneliness and isolation were significant national challenges before the coronavirus pandemic, however a prolonged lockdown and shielding, while important for public health, has exacerbated this for large numbers of older people. Age Scotland's national helpline has experienced substantial increases in demand over the last few months from those seeking friendship calls.

The decline of the high street is often mentioned in the news and an unintended consequence of the national lockdown has resulted in many businesses facing financial uncertainty. Nevertheless, high streets and town centres should be at the heart of communities, and therefore supported to be attractive for commerce, socialising, entertainment and local services. Local authorities will need to invest in town centres and enhance the provision of community space, potentially using empty retail space, to provide venues for a variety of activities of benefit to a large number of people. Easily accessible community spaces offer residents a sense of cohesion, belonging and will help people to age well.

The Scottish Government 'A Fairer Scotland for Older People' clearly demonstrates the many ways that older people want to be involved in society, whether that is through working or volunteering, as well as using community space to interact with other generations.² Older people regularly tell us of the ways their communities could be enhanced, made more accessible, age-friendly and appealing.

¹ NRS 2018 population projections, <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/population-projections/population-projections-scotland>

² A Fairer Scotland for Older People - <https://hub.careinspectorate.com/media/3448/a-fairer-scotland-for-older-people-a-framework-for-action.pdf>

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Below is a list of the main areas of focus for the Town Centre Action Plan that would help ensure that town centres better suit the needs of older people:

- Accessibility – wide and flat pavements, dropped kerbs, ramps, pedestrianised zones, plentiful seating would make town centres more accessible to people of all ages and encourage them to spend longer there. It is also important to ensure that there is consistency on adaptations and safety measures for those with visual impairment.
- Public toilets – the closure and lack of availability of public toilets is an issue raised with Age Scotland regularly before the coronavirus pandemic hit. Local authorities often cited them as too expensive to run and would feature on early annual budget saving proposals. In recent months, public toilets have largely been closed and as lockdown restrictions have eased, the number reopening is low, making it harder for older people and those with certain medical conditions to leave home for any prolonged length of time. The use of local businesses as an alternative is satisfactory up to a point but the network is patchy and often cited as inadequate by older people. Ensuring the ample provision of public toilets is highly beneficial to the public and tourists, and would remove the high level of anxiety trips into town centres can cause older people and those with medical conditions.
- Clear visual signage– this is particularly important to create more dementia friendly town centres and will be of wider benefit to all.
- Greenspace and plants – a focus should be on designing places that are pleasant to sit and spend time in, and access to greenspace is important for people’s good mental health.
- Community space if possible – we need more space that is for community use, as many older people may well be keen to spend time in their town centre but find that there is not really anything affordable to do. Community space that could be used for many different purposes could allow for a stimulating space for all members of the community to use.
- Decent transport links – many older people are reliant on bus routes to be able to go to town centres, yet especially in rural areas bus services may be so infrequent that it becomes much less of a viable option for them to use. This increases people’s sense of loneliness and isolation.
- Housing in the town centre – we still need to see more housing made available in town centres, particularly from regenerating unused buildings or former retail space. A real focus should be on accessible housing provision for older people and disabled people.

- Walking and biking routes, active travel – in general, a greater focus on the provision of cycle paths and wide pavements will improve the accessibility of town centres and help to encourage active travel.

Want to find out more?

As Scotland's national charity supporting people over the age of 50, Age Scotland works to improve older people's lives and promote their rights and interests. We aim to help people love later life, whatever their circumstances. We want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow older.

Our Policy, Communications and Campaigns team research, analyse and comment on a wide range of public policy issues affecting older people in Scotland.

Further information

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