

New realities of retail and e-commerce in Scotland

Economy and Fair Committee
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Scotland is going through a significant demographic shift, with a population that is both ageing rapidly and shifting geographically from the West of Scotland to the East, presenting specific challenges for more rural towns and centres. 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%. 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 health and active ageing among its population, then it is essential that investment is made now to help develop towns that fit for purpose and the future.

Keeping Town Centres Alive

1. How are Scottish high streets and town centres changing? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Scotland's town centres?

The decline of the high street is often mentioned in the news and an unintended consequence of Covid-19 and the subsequent national lockdowns has resulted in many businesses facing financial uncertainty. Even before this period, there has been a visible reduction in the occupancy of commercial spaces on high streets and town centres and the nature of units changing as out of centre supermarkets and retail parks open up.

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, potential using empty retail space to provide venues for a variety of activities to benefit a large number of people. Easily accessible community spaces offer residents a sense of cohesion, belonging and will help people to age well.

It is worth noting that there is a high degree of digital exclusion among older people in Scotland and as such do not engage with e-commerce, relying on in person commerce. There are around 500,000 over 50s in Scotland who do not have access to the internet, and up to 600,000 over 50s without a smartphone. While for some people this is a choice which should be respected, for others it may be because they live in an area with connectivity issues or because they don't feel they have the confidence or skills needed. Many of those on the lowest incomes may be at risk of experiencing digital exclusion because they cannot afford the cost of equipment or a broadband connection. In the Scottish Household Survey 2019, only half of over 60s in the "most deprived" areas used the internet, compared to 83% in the "least deprived" areas.

2. How do we encourage people to live in town centres? What types of policies are needed?

We would echo many of the recommendations made by the Town Centre Action Plan Review Group in a 'New Future for Scotland's Town Centres'. We believe that their recommendation below should form the core foundation for rejuvenating Scottish town centres.¹

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the formal positioning of towns and town centres in National Planning, including requirements to produce town and town centre plans, co-produced with communities and enhance data collection and use at town and town centre level. To support that:

- Towns and town centres to be included and prioritised in National Planning Framework
- Town Centre Plans need to be developed and implemented with the local community and with a focus and commitment on the wellbeing of people, the planet and the economy
- Develop a revised and enhanced focus on measurement and data for towns and town centres

Housing Delivery

There is an acute shortage of housing of all tenures across Scotland, many town centres have become unaffordable and inaccessible to its' potential residents. This in turn is ultimately driving population decline in many semi-rural and rural town centres where the local population cannot find suitable housing options available to them. This impact cascades down and impacts a range of areas such as local employment opportunities, provision of shops and other services, as well as impact on local authority revenues.

According to the Equality and Human Right's Commission's Report on Housing and Disabled People in Scotland, only 17% of Scottish local authorities set a target for accessible or adaptable housing.² This same report found that only 41 per cent of Scottish local authorities had carried out an Equality Impact Assessment on the Local Development Plan.³

Two important recommendations from the report are that local authorities should ensure that a minimum of 10 per cent of new housing is built to wheelchair-accessible standards and that local authorities must also meet the Public Sector Equality Duty when planning new housing.⁴ Age Scotland fully supports these recommendations as a minimum target, and they should be embedded in the in the future NPF4 to ensure there is consistency across local authorities.

A new report, 'Senior Housing in Scotland', has analysed the housing available for older people in each local authority area compared with the population estimate of people over 65. It has found that the levels of supply are lowest in Orkney (1%) and Fife (2%), while Dundee (17%) and Aberdeen (10%) have higher than the average supply.⁵ It starkly demonstrates the divergence in availability in homes that are specifically designed for older people across Scotland.

¹ A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres, Town Centre Action Plan Expert Review Group (February 2021)

² <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/housing-and-disabled-people-scotland-hidden-crisis-long-summary.pdf>

³ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/housing-and-disabled-people-scotland-hidden-crisis-long-summary.pdf> Page 9

⁴ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/housing-and-disabled-people-scotland-hidden-crisis-long-summary.pdf> Page 10

⁵ 'Senior Housing in Scotland: a development and an investment opportunity?', <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JPIF-10-2020-0119/full/html>

Local planning authorities must be more directive and ensure that vacant and derelict land (and buildings) are recycled and utilised again quickly. These sites can offer excellent regeneration opportunities for retail, housing or mixed use developments. The Age Scotland National Housing Survey 2020⁶ found that some of the most common reasons older people may wish to move home were:

- To be closer local shops and services (41%)
- Close to current local community (22%)
- Communal space where you can meet other residents (6%)

This demonstrates that there is a market for homes in the centre of towns which are affordable, accessible and energy efficient, strengthening connection to people and services around them.

Local Authority Strategies for Age Friendly / Dementia Friendly Communities

The Age Scotland 2018 project report on Age and Dementia Aware Communities found that out of Scotland's 32 local authorities, only 12 had formal policies or strategies in place for making their local authority age friendly or dementia friendly. If we want Scotland's town centres to be inclusive, safe places for everyone to live and grow older it is essential that local authorities have appropriate strategies and policies in place to ensure they can meet the needs of their older and disabled residents. Alzheimer's Society defines a dementia friendly community as:

"One in which people with dementia are empowered to have high aspirations and feel confident knowing they can contribute and participate in activities that are meaningful to them"

The Life Changes Trust has found that there are nine key principles to ensuring that are communities can become dementia friendly:

1. They adopt a social model of disability, rather than a medical model
2. They take an assets-based approach that identifies and mobilises individual and community assets rather than focusing only on problems and needs
3. People with dementia and carers have a significant say, that places them at the heart of the community so they can shape it
4. They are multi-generational
5. They enable people with dementia and carers to do what really matters to them
6. They provide appropriate training to staff and volunteers that goes beyond awareness raising
7. They meet with other communities so they can learn from each other
8. They collaborate with others and work in partnership to maximise use of resources and skills
9. They mentor new age friendly communities

3. How can equality and diversity issues be addressed in policies that create and sustain resilient town centres?

⁶ Age Scotland National Housing Survey 2020

With many Scottish towns experience significant shifts in demographics towards older populations, it is vital that town centres can support healthy ageing in place and have a built environment that can support this, such as:

Accessibility

Wide and flat pavements, dropped kerbs, ramps and 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 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 experienced by 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

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.

Transport and Active Travel Options

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.

In general, a greater focus on the provision of cycle paths and wide pavements will improve the accessibility of town centres and help encourage active travel.

6. Who or what can drive change in Scottish town centres?

National Planning Framework 4

The current draft National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) will form a core part of a range of strategies and policies sitting alongside the Scottish Governments Housing to 2040 and Population Strategy. These policy documents must ensure that the needs of older and disabled people can be met now and in the future by local authorities when maintaining and enhancing local town centres. We particularly welcome proposed planning policies such as '20 Minute Neighbourhoods'; such actions will be vital to ensuring local communities and town centres are equipped with easy to access local services such as health facilities, shops and other essential infrastructure.

Engagement with Older and Disabled People

We would particularly like to emphasise the importance of engagement with older people through the development of Local Place Plans. Enabling meaningful placemaking and connections to communities will improve how people of all ages enjoy where they live. It is well established within academic research and literature that older people should be involved in the process of future placemaking to help keep them active and to combat loneliness and isolation. As well as older people being involved, there should be explicit focus on involving people living with dementia and their carers, as well as wider health professional in placemaking and the co-production of decisions that relate to them. Overall it should always be remembered, not all older people will have the same expectations and visions for what their future homes, communities and town centres will look like; older people in Scotland represent a diverse demographic of our population and as such engagement must be a core theme running through the planning process.

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.

Our work is guided by the views and needs of older people themselves.

Further information

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