

Scottish Women's Convention Response
Town Centre Action Plan Expert Review Group:
Call for Written Evidence
August 2020

Introduction

In June 2020, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government announced a review of the Town Centre Action Plan which was launched in 2013. The review will be undertaken by an expert review group. As part of its deliberations, the group is inviting individuals, organisations and stakeholders to contribute through this Call for Evidence.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. Recently the SWC has undertaken a series of digital roadshows with women throughout Scotland. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas.

What are the challenges and opportunities facing town centres in Scotland and how should these be addressed?

Throughout lockdown, the SWC has consulted with women across Scotland in a variety of different ways regarding what they would like to see change in their town centres. The current pandemic has seen many women rely on their local communities. It is hoped that funding and localised strategies will build on this. Discussions with women have included:

- We need to make use of town centres to ensure that women have access to digital and infrastructure means. This should include educational upskilling.
- Ongoing cuts to public transport have seen many vital community links lost. Women and their families are often those who are most impacted by this. High quality, low cost public transport is essential to ensuring decent accessibility to town centres. Failure to account for this means that all other planning is impacted.
- Investment in services which women use on an increasing basis needs to be secured. Further funding and planning for public social care services and community-based initiatives is key.
- A joined up and collaborative approach between the public, private and third sector is essential to meet community-based needs.
- Businesses and trade unions require a dialogue to promote and ensure that the Real Living Wage is paid across all sectors. This should include stringent procurement procedures that are subject to continuous monitoring and analysis when collaborating on town centre development.
- Recognising the need to invest locally in women's skills and development. This must include identifying skills gaps and retraining programmes to take account of all age groups. This is particularly crucial in sectors where women are under-represented.
- Planning for localised strategies to ensure community-based initiatives can continue to provide support for women's services, including Violence Against Women organisations.
- The risk of social isolation, particularly for older women. Services that this group once relied upon should be reinstated.

What are the barriers to developing town centres suitable for their communities and how can these be removed?

There are a number of challenges facing town centres. The unique impact of these on women cannot be overlooked. Combatting these issues and recognising where opportunities arise are crucial to ensuring development works for women's equality. Women use town centres as they make up the majority of workers in the retail and services sector. They require access to town centres for services. Ensuring such spaces are both safe and secure is of the utmost importance. Any approach must significantly account for these challenges including:

- A winding down of Government support packages to offset business loss during COVID-19. Accounting for the risk of a subsequent lockdown later in the year on businesses at a local level and the impact of this on communities is crucial.
- An over reliance on out of town shopping due to cheaper options. This is a particular issue for those without their own transport.
- The heightened impact of food insecurity for women and their families. For many, shops which can provide healthy and low-cost food options may be a lengthy commute, particularly in more ruralised areas.
- A need for appropriate facilities that account for the needs of everyone in the community including those with disabilities.
- The high rate of car parking charges within towns which do not make a profit for local authorities *“compared to the damage they are doing for local amenities.”*

“The high street is always so quiet now, even before lockdown. One of the things killing off local shops anyway was online shopping. I think we need to remember how this problem affects local small shops when thinking about these things.”

To what extent has the Town Centre Action Plan (TCAP) delivered against its stated ambitions? In what areas has delivery been successful? In what areas is there room for progress and/or barriers to overcome?

Ongoing investment at a local level which seeks to harness major involvement within communities is crucial to ensuring the success of town centres. Consultation in the surrounding area to highlight challenges at a local level must account for women’s voices and experiences. Planning development must also account for the unique geographical make up of Scotland. Best practice between communities should be used that can be adapted to local wants and needs. This should also note the significant challenges that ruralised or urban areas face themselves. Progress should be looked at in areas including:

- A further emphasis on the use of digital and green technology in a way that works for economic renewal for women.
- A need for clear consultation with businesses in particular sectors where threats emerge to employment within local areas.
- Expansion of initiatives to transform vacant town centre buildings into local community- based initiatives or affordable social housing.
- A further emphasis on community driven work that incorporates local organisations into planning. Women have noted that more and more people are becoming interested in their local communities. This should be utilised to provide the most effective action plans.

- A renewed emphasis on equality impact assessments when conducting all planning to account for any indirect discrimination on women. All initiatives should be robustly analysed to consider this.

If TCAP were to be revised, what additional or replacement areas and objectives would you recommend should be included and how should these be addressed?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the invaluable role that women play within Scotland's local towns and cities. Despite this, women stand to be amongst those most disproportionately hit by the economic fallout. Town centre planning must use this opportunity to not only continue with previous plans but also to provide a refreshed strategy that ensures equality is at the forefront. Other issues that must be looked at should include:

- Prioritising projects that support women, such as making use of existing infrastructure for the expansion of early learning and childcare services.
- Equal representation of women on all advisory groups and boards regarding improvement of town centres.
- Utilisation of outdoor space within town centres to provide leisure activities. Using green space to provide children with access to healthy outdoor exercise was seen as a great way forward for public health.
- Prioritising emerging markets which use the space and practicalities of town centres to provide secure and well-paid employment for women.
- Ensuring town centre planning accounts for additional responsibilities women face, including caring, and the impact that ineffective town layouts have on them. For instance, inaccessible childcare provision that does not accommodate women and their needs.
- Real terms investment in towns must focus on younger women and the sectors which they find themselves clustered within. Strategies to aid young people's prospects must be able to show long term investment in secure employment and skills opportunities.

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Expert Advisory Group call for evidence regarding Town Centre Action Planning. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to equality at both a national and local level.

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The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

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