



Inquiry into town centres and retail

A Response from CTA

March 2022

www.ctauk.org

Summary

The Community Transport Association (CTA) is a UK charity which champions, connects and grows the Community Transport sector. We have over 160 members across Scotland who provide a diversity of local transport services which are always for a social purpose and never for a profit.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to Economy and Fair Work Committee's timely and important inquiry into town centres and retail given our mission of accessible, inclusive and sustainable transport for all and our strong interest in placemaking.

Community Transport operators are at the heart of their communities, helping people across Scotland, especially older and disabled people, to access key amenities and services like local high streets and major shopping centres. The pandemic has underlined how many Scots rely on Community Transport to safely access town centres and retail.

The key points of our response to the Committee's call for views are:

- Local authorities should recognise the Community Transport sector as a key partner in revitalising Scottish town centres. Our members help many Scots to access local high street and major shopping centres in a sustainable way
- Many Scottish high streets today discourage walking, wheeling or cycling and are hostile to older or disabled people. The future should be liveable, walkable and mixed-use town centres which are accessible to all
- Sustainable town centres encourage sustainable travel. Tackling air and noise pollution in town centres can make local high streets safer, more attractive and more accessible
- Local authorities need to check the unrestrained growth of developments (e.g. out-of-town retail parks) which lock-in car dependency, undermine the high street and are incompatible with their net zero commitments
- Local authorities should utilise Section 75 agreements to secure developer contributions to sustainable Community Transport schemes (e.g. e-bike or electric car clubs) in town centres
- Local authorities should empower local communities and invest in community-led initiatives to regenerate local high streets, take climate action in town centres and support everyone to access retail

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?

Scottish high streets and town centres are changing due to a range of global, national and local trends. First and foremost, the inexorable rise of online shopping has eroded the formerly central position of urban retail in local economies. This has led to much reduced footfall and a now chronic over-supply

of retail units in many high streets and town centres. The COVID-19 pandemic has likely further locked-in the 'digital-first' habits and behaviours of tech-savvy consumers in the 21st century.¹

However, this trend has been exacerbated and accelerated by political and policy decisions which have contributed to the hollowing out of many town centres across Scotland. Local authorities have for many years given planning approval to unsustainable out-of-town retail parks and other commercial developments which lock-in car dependency; attract businesses, workers, consumers and visitors away from town centres; and undermine the historic rationale the high street. Many town centres are also overly-reliant on access via car. Local authorities and developers need to work together with people and communities to reverse this trend in order to revitalise Scotland's town centres, deliver on the promise of 20-minute neighbourhoods and achieve their net zero targets.

There is a great deal of local passion and pride which could be harnessed in this effort. The greatest strength of Scotland's town centres is the commitment of local people. Town centres are at the heart of the community. Local identity, pride and even a sense of purpose and hope for the future are deeply tied to the fortunes of their local high street in the hearts and minds of local people. The high street is a visible and visceral sign of a community's progress or decline.

Sustainable town centres encourage sustainable travel. Tackling air and noise pollution – such as through pedestrianisation, reallocation of road space and building on the success of 'Spaces for People',² as well as by increasing the cost of private car parking, prioritising local bus services and investing in local Community Transport services – is an effective way to improve the quality of the experience of the local high street and encourage people to return.

The future is liveable town centres which are accessible to all, more densely populated than they are today and adaptable to a diverse range of residential to commercial uses. Those resilient high streets which have thrived during the pandemic have been in liveable, walkable places. It will be important for town centres to diversify economically and socially, transitioning to become places not just for daytime retail or office buildings, but also for events, leisure and recreation, urban living and daily community life.

Case Study: Stockton-on-Tees

Some local authorities across the UK are taking radical steps to transition to a new and exciting future for their town centres. In Stockton-on-Tees in County Durham in the North East of England, the council is planning to demolish an 'ailing shopping arcade' to be replaced with a 'riverside park'.

The transformational project will reduce an over-supply of retail units – an increasing proportion of which are empty or underused – to create a large new green space for leisure, recreation, exercise,

¹ www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/digital-consumer-trends-lockdown-behaviour.html

² www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/projects/2020/scotland/spaces-for-people-making-essential-travel-and-exercise-safer-during-coronavirus

tourism and events. Road space in the town centre will also be reduced and reallocated for walking, wheeling and cycling.³

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

A significant weakness of many Scottish high streets and town centres is the interlinked problem of poor accessibility and a lack of sustainability. Many allocate more space to private cars than to pedestrians, cyclists or wheelchair users against the principles of the sustainable transport hierarchy.⁴ High levels of road traffic can make local high streets a less attractive and less safe place for most people to spend time and money, especially for older or disabled people with mobility needs. Infrastructure investments tend to be focused on improving and maintaining roads, rather than pavements or cycle paths. As research by Living Streets Scotland has evidenced, ‘the walking environment in Scotland is hostile for older people’ due to uneven pavements, frequent flooding due to blocked drains, pavement parking and air and noise pollution.⁵

Many older and disabled people find themselves isolated in their own homes or living in neighbourhoods which are not close to any amenities or services. Scotland’s Community Transport sector plays a critical role in helping many older and disabled people to travel to their nearest shop or supermarket for groceries and other basic necessities, because these amenities are increasingly not located in the places and communities where people actually live.

Instead, they are increasingly in out-of-town locations which are inaccessible to those who cannot access or afford private or even public transport. Nearly 1 in 3 of Scottish households do not have access to a car, which is a higher proportion of the population than in any other part of the UK, and this rises to almost 1 in 2 households in Glasgow.⁶ Investing in the community-led solutions of the Community Transport sector, from dial-a-ride to e-bike schemes, can support everyone to access the local high street (*see Case Study below*). It’s been clear during the pandemic how many Scots rely on Community Transport to safely access town centres and retail.⁷

Case Study: Handicabs Lothian

Handicabs Lothian (HcL) is a charity based in Bathgate and Loanhead, which has been providing accessible transport for people in Edinburgh and across the Lothians who are unable, or have great difficulty, in using public or private transport since 1982.

HcL operates popular dial-a-ride and dial-a-bus services which provide flexible and highly personalised ‘door-through-door’ shopping service for people of all ages with limited mobility due to age, illness, health conditions, social exclusion or geographical remoteness. 35% of passengers are wheelchair

³ www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/feb/11/is-this-the-future-for-britain-stockton-on-tees-park-high-street

⁴ www.transport.gov.scot/active-travel/developing-an-active-nation/sustainable-travel-and-the-national-transport-strategy

⁵ www.livingstreets.org.uk/media/6660/our-streets-too.pdf

⁶ www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-household-survey-2019-supplementary-analysis/pages/6

⁷ <https://cta.uk.org/report-serving-scotland-during-covid>

users and many cannot use buses, cars or taxis. Specially trained divers and specially adapted vehicles connect users with local high streets and major shopping centres, helping many older and disabled people to live more active, independent lives in their own community.⁸

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

The Scottish Government can drive change in Scottish town centres by strengthening the national policy frameworks within which other actors and stakeholders like businesses, local authorities and communities operate and make decisions. For example, the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) is a critical opportunity to influence the long-term future of local authority planning to ensure developments contribute to town centres which are accessible, thriving and sustainable. NPF4 should require developments to be compatible with net zero by preventing car dependency and encouraging sustainable travel through design. The Scottish Government can also direct funds for national regeneration schemes to local, community-led projects which revitalise and repopulate town centres.

A number of local authorities are taking very positive steps to drive change in their town centres. For example, Aberdeenshire Council have recently pedestrianised several streets in Peterhead's town centre to reduce the risk posed by traffic and "promote a safe environment", attract new businesses to the area and enable events to be held there.⁹ Similarly, Dumfries and Galloway Council are supporting the redevelopment of Midsteeple Quarter in Dumfries, which will be 'a sustainable and car-free new neighbourhood in Dumfries town centre' to 'breathe new life into the High Street, encourage active travel and exercise, reducing commuting and carbon emissions'.¹⁰

However, other local authorities are taking steps in the wrong direction. During the pandemic, some councils offered free parking in town centres – such as Renfrewshire Council's Free for Three scheme in Paisley.¹¹ As part of efforts to encourage shoppers to return to the high street as part of the COVID-19 recovery, many more councils have suspended car parking charges – including South Ayrshire Council in Ayr¹² and Midlothian Council in Dalkeith.¹³ Some local authorities are even looking to worsen inaccessibility and car dependency – such as East Ayrshire Council, which is moving ahead with plans to create 3 new car parks in Kilmarnock.¹⁴ These measures are damaging and counter-productive. By increasing private car use they will increase carbon emissions and local air pollution; discourage sustainable travel choices; increase risks to the safety of pedestrians and cyclists, especially for older and disabled people; and reduce accessibility in Scottish town centres.

The Workplace Parking Levy could help drive change in Scottish town centres. The legislation empowers local authorities to choose to introduce new levies tailored to local needs to encourage modal shift; build more sustainable town centres; and raise revenue to invest in sustainable transport

⁸ www.hcltransport.org.uk/dial-a-bus-main

⁹ www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/aberdeen-aberdeenshire/3747729/peterhead-traffic-ban-as-town-centre-dynamic-changes

¹⁰ www.midsteeplequarter.org

¹¹ www.dailyrecord.co.uk/in-your-area/renfrewshire/parking-charges-back-paisley-despite-25376714

¹² www.dailyrecord.co.uk/ayrshire/south-ayrshire-council-allow-free-25533513

¹³ www.edinburghlive.co.uk/news/edinburgh-news/free-parking-coming-back-dalkeith-20587070

¹⁴ www.dailyrecord.co.uk/ayrshire/kilmarnock-car-park-charges-reduced-24943529

projects and infrastructure, including local Community Transport schemes which help people get to work with e-bikes, community buses or car clubs. Evidence from Nottingham – the only UK city to implement such a levy to date – suggests that it has delivered reduced levels of congestion and pollution; increased investment in public transport infrastructure; and higher levels of public transport use.¹⁵ High levels of private car use and consequent congestion are significant problems in some Scottish town and city centres. In Glasgow alone, initial analysis suggests that a citywide Workplace Parking Levy could raise £30 million annually to reinvest in public transport, Community Transport and active travel.¹⁶

Local authorities should also make greater use of Section 75 agreements to drive change in Scottish town centres. Local development plans can place clear obligations upon developers which are necessary for their proposals to be approved (*see Case Study below*).

Case Study: Developer Contributions to Electric Car Clubs in Aberdeen

In partnership with CoWheels, Aberdeen City Council is utilising Section 75 agreements to require developers to contribute to the creation of car share schemes which help to build people-friendly places. New residential developments in Dyce on Aberdeen's outskirts and on Pittodrie Street in the city have been approved with very limited parking spaces and three years of funding from the developer for a new electric car club for residents with EV charging points on site.

Local authorities across Scotland could leverage Section 75 agreements to require developers to invest in sustainable transport in town centres through contributions to existing or new local Community Transport operators, including e-bike or electric car clubs.

Replicating this approach across Scotland would help to accelerate the modal shift required for net zero by discouraging private car ownership; making shared transport accessible, affordable and convenient; and encouraging active travel. Every shared car takes 10 private cars off the road.¹⁷

Communities also have a critical role to play in driving change in town centres. As community-led solutions, Community Transport providers are at the heart of their local community and led by local people, often by volunteers. They understand the transport needs of their community – especially older and disabled people or those experiencing social isolation or exclusion – and have a proven track record of designing and delivering accessible, inclusive and sustainable solutions. It is vital that local authorities recognise the Community Transport sector as a key partner in revitalising town centres.

Case Study: Climate Action Strathaven

Climate Action Strathaven was established as a charity in 2020 by local people in the South Lanarkshire market town to bring the community together to reduce its carbon emissions and play its part in the fight against climate change. It runs several exciting sustainability projects from its 'Eco Hub' in the town centre and a secondary location on the main road through the town – including a

¹⁵ https://archive2021.parliament.scot/S5_Rural/RECC_WPL_Nottingham_City_Council.pdf

¹⁶ www.glasgow.gov.uk/councillorsandcommittees/viewSelectedDocument.asp?c=P62AFQDNZLDXT1NTZ3

¹⁷ <https://como.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CoMoUK-Scotland-Car-Club-Summary-Report-2020.pdf>

car club of three vehicles, including an EV, with more on the way; a fleet of e-bikes for rent; an e-cargo bike project with local retailers; and a bicycle repair workshop.

The community-led project is now planning to deliver a community bus service to enable local residents and people in Glasgow to access Strathaven town centre without a car, as well as working with Sandford and Upper Avondale Community Councils to develop 'Village Connect' buses to sustainably link Strathaven and its many surrounding villages. Local businesses and employers are getting behind the project, working together to attract more footfall and retail spending on the local high street.¹⁸

Further information

To discuss this consultation response further, or to engage with the CTA and our members in Scotland on any other issue, please contact:

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The Community Transport Association (CTA) is the UK charity that represents and supports providers of Community Transport. Our 160 members in Scotland are local charities and community groups which provide transport services always for a social purpose and never for profit. We believe in accessible, inclusive and sustainable transport for all.

¹⁸ <https://castrathaven.org>