

Cross-Party Group on Towns and Town Centres

Wednesday 8th March 2023, 12.45 -13.45

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Siobhian Brown MSP
Fiona Hyslop MSP
Marie McNair MSP

Invited guests

Phil Prentice	Scotland's Towns Partnership
Jackie Shearer	Manager, Possilpark Business Improvement District
Stephen McCarron	Development Manager, ACDI
Scott Mackay	Executive Director, Midsteple Quarter Project, Dumfries

Non-MSP Group Members

Omar Afzal	Possilpark BID
Sarah-Jane Allsopp	Dumfries and Galloway Council
Karen Anderson	Hirta
Sue Barnard	Oban Community Council
Iqbal Bedi	Intelligens Consulting
Ronald Beveridge	Tillicoultry, Coalsnaughton & Devonside Community Council
Elaine Bone	STP
Diane Brown	Alloa First
Hollie Bruce	STP
Claire Carpenter	The Melting Pot
Sam Cassels	Scottish Government
Peter Coyne	Independent Consultant
Devon DeCelles	Historic Environment Scotland
Carey Doyle	Community Land Scotland
Jennifer Dumbreck	Blachere Illumination UK
Mhairi Duncan	SCDI
David Dunlop	Glasgow City Council
Louise Dunn	Moray Council
Ewan Eccleston	Glasgow City Council
Lisa Edwards	ShopAppy

Todd Ferguson	Scottish Parliament Staff
Doug Flett	SCCN
Ian Fowell	Small Towns Group
David Francis	Traditional Music Forum
David Fryer	Torry Development Trust
Rona Gibb	Paths For All
Gordon Gilfillan	Community Energy Scotland
Catherine Greig	Vale of Leven Credit Union
David Grove	Fife Council
Ros Halley	Tartan Jigsaw
Tom Henderson	SAC
Linda Hendry	SURF - Scotland's Regeneration forum
Pauline Hinchion	Scottish Communities Finance Ltd
Julie Hogg	South of Scotland Enterprise
Tanya Jones	Office of Maggie Chapman MSP
Jen Lawie	Aberdeen City Council
David Lonsdale	Scottish Retail Consortium
Scott Mackay	Midsteeples Quarter
Sandra McCallum	Ayr Bus Users Group
Ross McKay	Office of Siobhian Brown MSP
Katey McKay	Angus Council
Shonah Mckechnie	Cni Scotland
Barbara McNaughton	East Ayrshire Council
Sheila McWhirter	The Scottish Government
David Melhuish	Scottish Property Federation
Caroline Morrison	South Ayrshire Council
Eugene Mullan	Smith Scott Mullan Associates
Rosemary Munro	Huntly Development Trust
Deborah Murray	Byres Road & Lanes BID
Bill Pagan	CDT
John Park	Prestwick Community Council
Phil Prentice	Scotland's Towns Partnership
Arusa Qureshi	Culture Collective
Alison Read	Alison Read Digital Content
Debbie Robertson	Aberdeenshire Council
K J Rowswell	Stevenston Community Council
Maria Rybaczewska	University of Stirling
Karen Shaw	Vis a Vis
Jackie Shearer	Possilpark Business Improvement District
Tom Sneddon	Tom Sneddon: Architect
Lynne spence	Community Council
Chris Story	Message Matters
Robbie Toomey	Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
James Trolland	Sustainable Drumchapel
John Turner	Byres Road & Lanes BID
Jo Waddell	Dunbar Trades Association
Sonya Warren	Moray council
John Weir	Isle of Bute B.I.D. Visit Bute
Sheena Wellington	City Centre & Harbour Community Council
Margaret Whitelaw	Lenzie Community Development Trust

Cheryl Williamson
Craig Wilson
Ian Winton
Lindsay Wood
Ali Wood

South Lanarkshire Council
Historic Environment Scotland
Stevenston Community Council
A Heart for Duns
Business Gateway

Apologies

Neil Bibby MSP
Cllr Debbi McCall
Caitlin McLeod
Fergus Murray
Prof Leigh Sparks

Midlothian Council
Visit Scotland
Argyll & Bute Council
University of Stirling

Agenda item 1

Welcome and Opening Remarks– Siobhian Brown MSP

Convener Siobhian Brown MSP welcomed all to the meeting and noted MSP attendance and apologies. She noted the meeting would focus on the topic of “People Power” in Scotland’s towns.

Agenda item 2

Minute of last meeting and Matters Arising – Siobhian Brown MSP, Convener
Minutes accepted. Proposed by P. Prentice and seconded by J. Weir. There were no matters arising.

Agenda item 3

Overview: Phil Prentice, Chief Officer, Scotland’s Towns Partnership

PP introduced today’s theme, People Power. Over the past few decades control and ownership of Scotland’s towns and city centres has changed dramatically. There are now a large number of commercial organisations, absentee landlords but also the power levers are held mainly in local government, and people aren’t sure where to start if they want to enact change.

Speakers and examples given today will show that change can be made, helped by Scotland’s Business Improvement Districts and the strategy, A New Future for Scotland’s Towns, which itself identifies that we need more community enterprise and ownership for the strategy to be successful.

Agenda item 4

Remaking Saracen: Jackie Shearer, Manager, Possilpark Business Improvement District

In late 2019, the pilot BID was started by a collective of local traders who were wanting to halt the decline of Saracen Street, not only from a business perspective but also from a community perspective.

The area is an area of multiple deprivation and sits high in the social index but has a number of valuable assets which were identified by the BID. One significant asset was the history and heritage of the area which was used by the group to engage the community.

The BID was regularly supported by NG homes across a number of projects. This support was invaluable due to the BID still being a pilot, therefore additional funding being required. One such project was the refurbishment of shop frontages on Saracen Street which resulted in £400,000 of grant funding from Glasgow City Council, through the Government's Town Centre Fund. Eleven shop fronts on Saracen Street were refurbished back to a heritage aesthetic. Subsequently, the BID has secured more funding from the Place Fund which will allow a second phase of shop face refurbishment. Whilst this benefitted the businesses themselves, it also enhanced the area for the wider community.

A second initiative organised by the BID during lockdown, was a food delivery service. Again, supported by NG Homes, the BID purchased food and items from local businesses, (including general groceries, fish suppers, toiletry packs) which were delivered to residents in the wider community. This gained a degree of press attention which in turn helped to further galvanize the community behind the BID.

Possilpark BID then started tackling more practical problems faced by the community, such as waste management. A commercial contract between the BID and a commercial supplier was put in place which allowed general waste bags to be offered to local businesses in small quantities. A day of action was also arranged, post-lockdown, between local businesses, numerous council services, NG Homes, community Groups and the BID to develop a holistic approach to waste.

Projects across 2020 and 2021 brought pleasure to the area and included planters, street banners, Christmas lights, and other festivities. A local #shopsaracen campaign (which later tied in with the wider, national Scotland Loves Local campaign) encouraged a circular economy within Possilpark. The roll out of the local gift card also highlighted that some shops were still operating without a till system which is something the BID is now working to support.

All of the above took place during the BID's pilot stage and bolstered a positive and vibrant local identity for the wider community. It was the collaboration of people and businesses within the community.

Agenda item 5

Auchinleck Community Development Initiative: Stephen McCarron, Development Manager, ACDI

Auchinleck has a population of 3,500 and its economy was historically mining and textiles – industries that were both affected by industrialisation meaning structural unemployment was prevalent across the area. This resulted in reduced economic activity, high levels of youth unemployment, increased anti social behaviour, alcohol misuse and increased apathy across the community.

The organisation initially had low impact levels of community engagement. A small team had lots of aspirational projects but these would stagnate at the points of development and funding. There was a lack of volunteers, a skills shortage which was crucial to the success of the organisation and the organisation was grant reliant. ACDI identified that a designated, full-time post was needed to push projects through the funding stages.

A public meeting was held to collect ideas and discuss solutions with the local community. Scottish Government then invested £80k over two years through the Strengthening Communities Programme which allowed the recruitment of a full time Development Manager.

Over that two-year period, three key development projects were successfully carried out. The first was a community garden created from a previously vacant two-and-a-half-acre site, a brownfield site for which ACDI achieved a community asset transfer. The community came forward and engaged in the design and shaping of the garden. Further investment of over £500k was received from lottery and EU Rural Development Fund.

The second project was to establish a successful social enterprise within the community. Connected to the new community garden, ACDI set up The Knowe Garden Centre as a commercial entity. The centre generated commercial income from successful public and private sector tenders and created 300+ employment opportunities for young people.

The final project was to deliver an area-based employability service. Further funding of £300k from Investing in Communities has been secured to recruit a dedicated employability team. The engagement model will work with over 300 residents to engage with job seeking services.

As a result of these projects, ACDI is now less grant reliant, retains key staff and has high levels of engagement with the community and other organisations within the community.

Agenda item 6

Midsteeple Quarter: Scott Mackay, Executive Director, Midsteeple Quarter Project, Dumfries

Midsteeple Quarter is a community benefit society operating in Dumfries town centre to redevelop empty high street properties to create a new neighbourhood with a mix of uses built on principles of local prosperity and wellbeing.

At the project's outset, buildings on the High Street were underused, in poor condition, and the community was demoralised about the state of the town centre. A main cause of this was monopolies held by national retail chains that prioritised large ground-floor footprints and neglected the upper floors of the historic buildings which were traditionally residential and now lay empty. This causes little to no footfall on the High Street after 5pm. Scott posed the question: How can leadership emerge out of this demoralisation within the community?

'Square Go', a creative engagement project held in 2016 by local arts and community organisation The Stove Network, brought volunteers to the High Street to start conversations with passers by about the town centre. Community engagement continued with volunteers taking on street clean-ups and practical actions like cleaning shopfronts and painting closes, in turn bringing more people and stakeholders into the wider conversation.

A grant from Dumfries & Galloway Council, via the Stove Network, started the process for the first community asset transfer, and the setup of a constitution and organisation to run it. The aim of the organisation was to bring high street properties into Community Ownership and develop them for the benefit of the community. The preferred organisational structure was a community benefit society which allowed them to offer community shares which seemed the right fit for the project. The launch day of the society in 2018 was attended by local politicians as well as the community, and 150 people signed up as members on that day. Current membership is now approaching 700. Members pay £1 upon joining and receive a share certificate to show their part ownership.

Midsteeple Quarter is now overseen by an elected board that employ a small team to run the organisation and projects day to day. Midsteeple Quarter then launched a document titled "A Blueprint for the Heart of Dumfries", which details their plans for the town.

The next project detailed by the Blueprint was community ownership of a group of underused and neglected high street buildings, and refurbish them into a working, enterprising quarter. The selected stretch of high street was adjacent to the historic Midsteeple building and was home to a number of properties that were significantly decayed as a result of neglect by absentee owners. This block became know as Midsteeple Quarter. The plan for this block was a mixed-use development of living, working, education, enterprise, and social spaces. It's location in the centre of the town would then hopefully stimulate new growth and investment around it, growing the local economy.

The masterplan was approved by the council with supplementary planning policy underpinned by an allocation in the local development plan. It has a statutory status. The masterplan was founded on three key principles:

- The local community takes the lead on the redevelopment.

- The town centre will be repopulated by creating high quality but affordable housing on upper floors.
- Dynamic, engaging street level activity will take place to support the local economy.

The masterplan uses a phased approach to break down the aspirations over a 15-to-20-year period, as acquisition and finances allow. Alongside the masterplan, the organisation is working on a geothermal district heating initiative for the entire quarter and potentially the wider high street and has already secured funding from the Scottish Government Community Renewable Energy Scheme and the Redress Communities Fund.

Phase 1 demonstrates the concept, but it was quickly realised that the property in question had larger potential. A plan was put in place for the redevelopment of the whole building and its entire 40-metre-deep rear plot. The plans seek to activate the close which links the high street to the car park and streets at the rear, whilst the building's façade that faces the high street is retained with the reinstatement of the traditional chimneys. The result is a mixture of flexible enterprise and community spaces on the ground and first floors with seven affordable flats to rent above. Construction is now underway with completion due in early 2024. Phase 2 is also underway, with site assembly and acquisition of further properties. During this phase the organisation has worked with the Scottish Land Fund, SOSE, and Architectural Heritage Fund on feasibility and funding for future acquisitions. Through a mix of crowdfunding, donations, Scottish Land Fund and South of Scotland Enterprise Grants a further four buildings have now been purchased. Until these buildings are redeveloped, the ground floor spaces are used for pop-up shops for new enterprises such as artist exhibitions, community consultations etc. Meanwhile uses (longer term leases until redevelopment occurs) are also carried out with local community partners.

To promote the work of the organisation, there is a community engagement and communications programme. This, alongside partnership working is key to the success of Midsteeples Quarter.

Agenda item 7

Discussion

Convener, Siobhian Brown MSP made comment that in her constituency of Ayr, there are a lot of empty properties with absentee landlords. She asked S Mackay if he could share more information about the process to get properties signed over from absentee landlords. S Mackay said that the process is long and ongoing. After starting in 2018, the process is about half way complete, with half of the buildings still not yet owned. The first building was a community asset transfer from Dumfries and Galloway Council but the next four were settled through private negotiation. The organisation had hoped to use Community right to buy but just mentioning community right to buy was enough motivation for the owners to sell and negotiate an affordable price. The buildings in question are worth significantly less than they were ten years ago and as such the owners seem largely happy to sell them.

The convener posed another question to S Mackay: what help could the Scottish Government or Dumfries and Galloway Council have provided to help the journey?

S Mackay answered that the hardest part is to pull together the funding. Funding for the project has come from so many different places, from local charities, the council, Scottish Government, Enterprise agencies, Architectural Heritage Fund, Scottish Land Fund. It's a lot of work to explore each of these avenues. A specific fund for this type of work would simplify and speed up the whole process.

Fiona Hyslop MSP directed to S Mackay that she hoped the previous week's parliamentary debate on Town Centres was useful for Midsteeple Quarter.

SB asked the following question: good leadership requires knowledge sharing within a proven framework followed by lessons identified, then lessons to be learned. How are we developing this using, for example, the sharing with other entities referred to by Phil Prentice?

S McCarron answered that ACDI has taken part in knowledge exchange visits to other similar organisations, particularly those who are in later stages of action to take key learnings for the future. The facility of knowledge and learning exchange through Community Alliance under Development Trust Association Scotland is the umbrella group was vital to the work completed by the organisation.

J Mauer commented on presentation by J Shearer: Many such actions work in all towns and it's important to share information press media and social media with comms organisations.

B McNaughton posed a question to J Shearer: It's difficult to get the community on board. What obstacles did you face and how did you overcome these challenges?

J Shearer answered that there are a lot of barriers to engaging the wider community. A number of the barriers in places like Possilpark are around the community feeling like they aren't heard or listened to and there aren't any opportunities to participate – that is the perception of the community. A lot of work by the BID was carried out on the street, engaging with people, taking the views as you get them: good, bad, or indifferent. The BID has also taken part in knowledge sharing and creative projects but in terms of just understanding how to engage or hear what the community want there's few better ways than being on the street talking to people. Social media is also useful for reaching people.

The Convener asked J Shearer if she'd seen a growth in confidence from local businesses since the project began. J Shearer answered that she had. It's a small area and whilst the levy is small, it's still challenging for some of the businesses to pay it. A handholding exercise between BID board members and these small businesses takes place to see them through the process. Once the levy is paid, the conversations and interest really begin and you can see that you're fostering an understanding of what the improvement district does.

K Doyle asked S McCarron if he could share more information about the community benefits fund. S McCarron answered that this was a collaboration of nine groups within the coalfields area of East Ayrshire, being led by the community-based organisations. The collaboration happened because of the perception of residents that community benefit that was earmarked specifically for Cumnock and Doon Valley, which is home to most turbines, was being spent elsewhere. This caused a real drive to be part of the decision-making process of where community benefit money would be spent. This broke down a lot of the 'territorialism' that existed between community groups and started everyone working together. The collective then approached the Scottish Government who provided a seed grant of £25k that funded a comprehensive community consultation on the development of a genuine community-led decision-making body which would absorb all community benefit moneys and decide where these funds would be spent. Recent approval has been received, as well as letters of comfort from around a dozen wind farm developers in the area who have committed their full community development packages, over a 25-year period to the collective. The sums total over £100m.

D Dunlop asked: what can we do to stop property owners from sitting on properties, particularly vacant sites where no rates are paid. P Prentice first revisited the point about shared learning which he highlighted is very important. The journey of the Midsteple Quarter team in relation to funding is complicated, the Scottish Government have addressed some of that through the place-based investment fund which has brought a few of the resources into one pot. In relation to learning, the Scottish Futures Trust has been tasked by Scottish Government to develop a suite of online case studies and shared learning, so that people in the future can access that resource to inform their own activity.

P Prentice continued: in terms of ownership, it's difficult but likely that we need to pursue the agenda of compulsory sales order, even though it's not in the current programme of government. Between this and compulsory purchase orders, communities should no longer be blighted by absentee owners. The convener followed P Prentice by mentioning briefly the example of the Station Hotel in Ayr.

L Hendry commented that a CPO isn't a quick process which can be off-putting to community groups. If it takes two to three years to build sufficient community links, it's more time to get to the stage of purchase. It also depends on your links with the local authority and how they see it, as well as your links with economic development colleagues and regeneration teams.

D Francis asked: what's the local economy of Auchinleck like? Is there a local food economy (a baker, a butcher) a post office, transport links? Is there a creative economy? S McCarron answered: yes, but it's a diminishing economy that's still experiencing closures caused by the pandemic. There is a local butchers, a railway station, we supply local produce to some local shops and flowers to local florists who sell on the garden's behalf.

R Gibb highlighted that there's still time to put forward nominations for the Scottish Walking Awards and K Doyle shared the details of the community wealth building consultation with all.

The convener thanked attendees and guest speakers for their valuable input.

Agenda item 8

Close of meeting.

The meeting closed with a note that the date for the next meeting is Wednesday 7th June, 12.45pm – 1.45pm