



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 18 May 2022

Session 6



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ECONOMY AND FAIR WORK COMMITTEE

14th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
- *Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)
- *Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
- *Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP)
- *Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
- *Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)
- *Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

- Martin Avila (Community Enterprise in Scotland)
- Ian Buchanan (Disability Equality Scotland)
- Dr Allison Orr (University of Glasgow)
- Nicoletta Primo (Sight Scotland)
- Pauline Smith (Development Trusts Association Scotland)
- Adam Stachura (Age Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 18 May 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:33]

Town Centres and Retail

The Convener (Claire Baker): Good morning and welcome to the 14th meeting in 2022 of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. Our first item of business continues our evidence gathering in our town centres and retail inquiry. The broad theme for today is keeping town centres alive, focusing on driving change and creating resilience.

I am pleased to welcome our first panel. Martin Avila is the chief executive of Community Enterprise Scotland, Dr Allison Orr is a senior lecturer in real estate at the University of Glasgow, and Pauline Smith is the chief executive of the Development Trusts Association Scotland. As always, it would be helpful if members and witnesses could keep their questions and answers as concise as possible.

I will ask the first question. From the evidence that we have gathered so far and a number of visits that we have been on, we have seen that community involvement and commitment have been recognised as being important, along with—sometimes—leadership and the change that has taken place. However, there are also issues of capacity to be addressed, and not all communities start from the same place when it comes to their level of engagement.

What more can be done to support less-empowered communities? I recognise that being engaged in that kind of work is part of the bread-and-butter role of the people on the panel.

For example, local place plans are one of the key pillars in trying to drive change. How do we support all communities to be engaged in that?

Martin Avila (Community Enterprise in Scotland): I thank the committee for giving me the chance to speak this morning.

How we engage the less listened to communities is a wicked problem. Communities in which individuals and families spend more of their time working, in order to earn the wages that they need to survive, obviously have less time to be involved in civic pursuits and engagements. However, there is a track record in Scotland—which is shown through the Scottish Government-funded social enterprise census—of there being

more social enterprises and community enterprises based in areas that are higher on the Scottish index of multiple deprivation list. There is a willingness to get involved in civic life in all communities, especially when it is focused around place.

Part of the problem is that the emphasis is often placed on the communities and the problems that they face themselves. There has to be an understanding that institutions are often based far from the communities in which they want to engage.

There is recognition that community engagement does not necessarily work. That sounds like a controversial statement: what do I mean by saying that community engagement does not necessarily work? If there are not links to and social capital in a community, it is difficult to make any sort of progress in that community. Members of the committee who have arrived new in any situation will recognise that: as your social capital and network of relationships build over time, it becomes easier to gather the political will to get things done. Institutions are faced with exactly the same problem in engaging with communities. If they are not based in those communities and do not have existing ties with them, they find it much more difficult to know where to go and to have the credibility to engage with them. A programme of community development is therefore needed.

I listened to the committee's last evidence session and noted that Euan Leitch from SURF—Scotland's Regeneration Forum mentioned how community development work seems to have fallen by the wayside over a number of years. However, working with an agenda that seeks to build relationships, capacity and links within and between communities gives us the best chance.

One of the biggest changes that I would like to see would be a result of the hybrid working environment that has been made possible through the changes of the past couple of years. That is the direction of travel in which I feel that we are going. We cannot have the levers and institutions of power so separate from our communities. We must embed in decision-making processes, and in officers and others, the possibility of progressing issues within the communities themselves. I think that it was Euan Leitch—it might have been somebody else—at the previous committee meeting who mentioned that having planners based in Inverness when making decisions about islands that are quite far from Inverness does not work. We now work in an environment that is much more conducive to institutions being spread throughout the communities that they are supposed to serve. I would like to see that change in the near future.

The Convener: Martin Avila has referred to the evidence that we heard last week. I do not know whether Dr Orr has had a chance to look at last week's evidence, which we took from the Scottish Property Federation and SURF. Martin raised points about increased capacity in local communities, whether in relation to planners or community development workers. Is that about a change of practice or would that require additional resources? We heard last week about the shortage of planners and the pressure on planning departments. Is there a resourcing issue in relation to making the changes in decision making that Martin outlined?

Dr Allison Orr (University of Glasgow): I thank the committee for inviting me along. There is certainly an issue with regard to resourcing in planning departments. They are expected to take on more and more, but there is a general feeling that they lack the resources and expertise to deliver on plans and to tackle the challenges that now face them.

A lot of my work is from the perspective of real estate. One thing that my research identifies is the growing fragmentation of ownership. Financial institutions no longer want to be active in that market, particularly when it comes to city centre and town centre retail. Many of them have moved out, in a trend that started back in 2006. There is therefore a major issue with regard to incentivising investors.

Those financial institutions are capital rich; they own many of the properties in towns and cities. Our smaller investors are often very naively involved in property. Their view was that they could buy a property and collect the rental income and would not have to do much. Therefore, there is, if you want a physical and visible change in our town and city centres, an issue with regard to co-ordinating those owners to actively manage their assets.

The Convener: I come to Pauline Smith. Would you say a bit about the development trust organisations, how your members engage with communities and how important they are with regard to town centre regeneration?

Pauline Smith (Development Trusts Association Scotland): Our members are from rural and urban locations, so they differ quite drastically from one area to the next.

You spoke about the less represented individuals. Sometimes, it just takes one person to change things, but they need the backing and the powers to do that. Our members have been heavily involved in the conversations that we have been having about local democracy, and about a community wealth building bill and the powers that

might come with that. They have all been quite excited about what could be.

Sometimes, there can be a lot of talk, but if you do not see action and people cannot voice their opinions about what they want, and if people do not have the powers to do what they want to do and there are lots of hoops to jump through, they lose the will and the incentive to do it. The length of time that it can take becomes a struggle. We have all been in situations in which it has taken a long time to get through the process and it is difficult to keep individuals' motivation up.

Our members have a wide variety of assets. Our community ownership support service has been heavily involved; I am sure that you guys are aware of the work that the service has done across Scotland.

Huntly Development Trust is one of our members—I think that committee members have been to visit some members. That trust has taken on some of the shops in its area. It has been outstanding and has taken such a creative approach to what it wants to develop.

Our members definitely have such creativity. Once you give ownership to the community, the ideas start to spin. It is not all about planning and the classes of development that you must have in the area. When we hand ownership to the community and development trust members, we get creativity—we get the historic aspect, arts and crafts, clothing, recycling and reuse all together by giving power to communities to make things a reality.

On the enterprise side of things, it is possible that previously not many people considered the possibility of opening a social enterprise in a town centre because of the cost—they probably did not have the money to spend on that. I have read a lot of the papers on the town centre action plan; it is interesting to see pricing structures. Allowing charities to enter town centres without the financial burden that would have existed previously gives them the chance to grow, to create their own money and to circulate that money within the economy. It allows community wealth building and so on.

The Convener: I will allow other members to explore some of those issues in more depth in a moment. The committee went to visit Midsteeple Quarter. The community ownership process is complicated and quite lengthy; as you said, it can cause fatigue. With regard to making one or two changes to make the process easier, one of the suggestions that the committee has heard is that there could be a central resource—funded by Government or the enterprise agencies—so that communities could draw on expertise, which would provide them with support when they needed it.

Would that be helpful? What else would help to shorten the process and make it easier?

Pauline Smith: Yes—that would absolutely be helpful. Obviously, I am passionate about community ownership support. There should be a go-to support provider, but there are other places where people can access support. People need a go-to trusted partner with expertise who understands all the hoops that people have to jump through.

We talk about the experience of people in deprived neighbourhoods. The legal structures of some of the arrangements are very scary, so someone is needed to hold people's hands through the process. Yes—a go-to support service is definitely needed.

The Convener: I bring in Maggie Chapman, to be followed by Fiona Hyslop.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning. Thank you for joining us.

Pauline Smith mentioned community wealth building. As you will be aware, the Scottish Government has committed to introducing a community wealth building bill. I know that legislation does not solve all problems, but what do you see as the opportunities in that around generating the incentives that you were talking about, building social capital and supporting community development? Will you tell us a bit about the opportunities in such legislation and what the risks are if we get it wrong?

09:45

Pauline Smith: We are meeting Ted Howard this afternoon: he is coming to us. He is the guru of community wealth building and is doing a tour at the moment.

One pitfall would be our not seeing things becoming reality. There has to be a full commitment to actually making things happen. The situation with local democracy is similar: we have had lots of conversations, but you actually have to make it happen. I looked at the call for action for the town centre action plan. That is great, but it is about making it happen.

The time that it takes is also important. We talk about fatigue: if we do not move things forward, people lose interest and it is hard to regain momentum in a community because it is hard to get it in the first place.

The power of the community wealth building agenda has to become a reality. We need to make the community asset side of things easier and more open. I had a conversation yesterday about common good assets and heard that that can be a minefield. I have had some initial conversations

about that. We should look at that. There are many common good assets out there.

We should listen to people. That is the main thing.

Maggie Chapman: Dr Orr, we are talking about creating liveable, vibrant and thriving town centres that support the communities that live in and around them. What are the opportunities in legislation for community wealth building?

Dr Orr: In some of the cities that I have studied, there has been a change in the number of residential units, but communities and public services have not kept pace with that growth. It is a chicken and egg situation: we have to provide services to attract people to live in our towns and city centres, but those services follow the people. There is a threshold that must be passed to justify those services. Having those services will encourage more city and town centre living.

The provision of a range of housing, particularly affordable housing, is also important. The property market in major cities such as Edinburgh or Glasgow is developing and implementing the build-to-rent model, but its success depends on the build-to-rent product and market conditions. In towns, investors are very nervous at the moment, so investment needs to be de-risked. Affordability is also an important part of the picture.

There are successful examples internationally—Vancouver is a good one. It has had a living first strategy for the past 30 years. The work is gaining momentum and is quite successful, but there is still an affordability problem.

Maggie Chapman: Martin, what opportunities are there to drive community enterprise and engagement through legislation?

Martin Avila: If it is okay, I will speak first about the idea of pitfalls. There can be a suggestion of false equivalence between community-run enterprises and general business enterprises. Anyone who has started a new or small business or who has tried to scale up a business knows that that is very difficult and takes time. That is part of the journey. I do not think that any community land owner or development trust has ever gone bust, and no community-owned pub has ever shut. The survival rates for community-owned retail far outstrip those for purely commercial retail.

We sometimes ask socially focused organisations and enterprises to hold themselves to a standard that no one could meet, and we ask them to deal, with a bit of sticky-back plastic, with the most wicked problems involving market and state failure, while making us all feel good about ourselves at the same time.

You asked about the opportunities for community wealth building. I sit on the steering

group for the proposed legislation. I would not say that it is scepticism, but I do not believe that legislation alone can change everything. Sometimes, legislation on its own cannot change anything.

I do not think that legislation is where the opportunities lie. The opportunities—for community wealth building, principally—lie in how we bring such principles into practice as well as policy. The most recent programme for government is the first place where we have seen the social impact of economic development being considered in the same place as everything else. Previously, programmes for government took the approach that economic decisions are dealt with in one place, where all the big boys and girls come and talk about the important stuff, and all the nice community stuff is dealt with in another place. We often hear people saying, “That’s a great community project” or “That’s great community building”, which can be a little bit pejorative. It is like when someone says, “She’s a great female architect,” and you have to say, “No—she’s a great architect,” and everything else flows from that point.

Where are the opportunities? What we are seeing is that an opportunity is being afforded to us by the fact that socially focused and economically focused organisations are recognising for the first time that we cannot focus solely on development of the value that is created by economic capital, but must instead think about natural capital, social capital and economic capital in similar terms. We have an opportunity to drive civic innovation by creating a civil society in Scotland that controls and develops economic assets of real value, for social purposes.

I think that there is also an opportunity for colleagues at the table today to show political leadership. The idea that economic decisions and social decisions have ramifications is something that can unite colleagues from across the parties. We are not seeing a false division between economic enterprise and state intervention; what we are seeing is an opportunity to start to build a fundamentally different model in which communities, community organisations and socially focused organisations play a stronger role not only in the civic governance of their communities, but in the local economy. Colleagues across the chamber will be able to find points of consensus that might not have been possible before.

An opportunity is afforded to Scotland to build capacity in development trusts, community organisations and communities by supporting them to own, control, develop and get value from economic assets of real importance. At the moment, a lot of the community asset transfer

process is around transferring economic liabilities, such as with sports centres that never worked even with central Government funding, and buildings that have suffered from lack of investment.

However, through the work of Community Land Scotland, the Development Trusts Association Scotland and registered social landlords, we have examples of socially focused, commercially driven organisations that control real economic assets and have been responsible for important economic developments in their communities. That represents the real opportunity that is afforded to Scotland and colleagues across the sector at the moment.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Good morning. We have heard that every town is unique and that any solution has to be unique to the town, and Pauline Smith noted that we need to have strong and creative individuals involved. I accept that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but if we look at organisations that support the necessary work, such as development trusts, other community-led organisations or the organisations that are involved in business improvement districts, what makes things work? We have heard that business improvement districts have an advantage because they have revenue and can pay people to do things, which is not always the case with development trusts. How do we get the most out of organisations to support individuals, and what should the relationship with councils be? Do we need town champions? What resource is needed for them? What is the interplay between the organisations?

Pauline Smith: I think that the ball lands with us. We need to work with BIDs, development trusts and CEIS to support and pool our expertise in general. We ask communities to pull together, and the various organisations in the area have to do that, too—and we do. A lot of our development trusts are working in partnership with BIDs and have integrated with them in local communities in relation to Scotland Loves Local. We have been working with the Scottish Land Commission in relation to asset transfers.

When Martin Avila was talking about community wealth, I was thinking that we are not reinventing the wheel here. Different terminology is used, but development trusts have been involved in community wealth building for years. Development trusts, CEIS and other agencies have supported those organisations to create community wealth and make things happen in their communities.

To be honest, I think that we just need to work together, and we all have a part to play. We need to identify where our expertise is, get the funding in to strengthen the development trusts and create

new vibrant development trusts. There needs to be partnership working.

Fiona Hyslop: What about working with councils?

Pauline Smith: Our community ownership support service and our community shares departments have gone out to local authorities to engage in training—well, we might want to call it not training but information gathering and the sharing of good practice. Hopefully, the councils will embrace that and will gain an understanding of why people want to own their assets. If there is a wee bit of reluctance on the part of a council, we can explain why community ownership is good and how the council can benefit from it.

There is a learning process on all sides—the councils, the communities and organisations such as ours. We have been doing continuing professional development with some councils—do not ask me to say exactly which ones—to share that information and good practice.

Fiona Hyslop: Martin Avila said that more is needed in terms of community development, and we have heard calls for council-based activity, town champions and more planners. However, if there is any resource, it might not necessarily be available for community enterprises or community development associations. How do we get that balance right? Where do the resources need to be? You can say “both”, but—

Martin Avila: Both—everywhere.

Fiona Hyslop: I know, but you will have to—

Martin Avila: That is the challenge that colleagues around the table face. We have limited resources and we have to understand where to direct them.

I know that this is a bit of a vague response but, realistically, the kind of leadership that we need and who we need to be in leadership depends on who is there at the time, because the individuals will step up and the organisations will step up. What could some of the components of that be? We need to see strong community land trusts and development trusts. We should aim to ensure that every town centre and every town in Scotland is served by a strong community development trust. I do not see any way of moving forward other than by engaging citizens directly in their economy within the civic structures that they have.

However, we also need to see that partnership working alongside local authorities. We need to be quite bold there and move past the idea that it is either the state or local enterprise that directs what goes on. I would like to see more work in Scotland around the development of public-common partnerships, where special vehicles are set up between the relevant actors in any one locality in

order to develop economic assets and take the town forward. We have to bring in actors such as the Federation of Small Businesses, because local traders care deeply about their towns and their communities. We need to see a blending of those, which will change on a town-to-town basis, because the economic model will be different for each town. There needs to be an ecological approach that takes into consideration the social, financial and natural capital assets of each community, and there must be a blended approach between local authorities, small private businesses and community-focused organisations, social enterprises and development trusts to take that forward.

I know that I have kind of avoided the question that you asked but, when it comes to any support that might be put in, we have to take a step back, because we have to support community development trusts and social enterprises to have a stake in schemes that deliver real revenue and are not dependent on the coffers of the state, which is a limited pot.

A recent study—forgive me; I cannot remember the name—said that £3.5 billion of value was delivered by onshore wind capacity in Scotland in the past two years and that, through community benefit clauses, £22 million was given to local communities. If we get to a stage at which community development trusts and special purpose vehicles that are public-common partnerships have, say, a 10 per cent stake in every wind farm, the sum that would come to communities would be £350 million.

We have to be bold and ask how we create economic enterprise that has an element of common control in our communities, because, in that way, they will be able to develop efficient and effective businesses that will continue to fund them well past the limits of what the state could provide, certainly within one parliamentary term or under one Administration.

10:00

Fiona Hyslop: I move to Allison Orr. When it comes to your concerns about rentier experience, we are, potentially, going to move to an economic model in which there is community asset transfer that involves a revenue stream—a stake in places that have community social benefit but perhaps have rented housing accommodation above them. What advice would you give, what would be the opportunities and pitfalls, and what is needed to enable the kind of economic model that allows community and social enterprises to get a revenue stream so that they can be independent from the state? If we are to go to that model, what would be your advice on enablers and inhibitors?

Dr Orr: When it comes to enterprises, cultural change among landowners is important. We have started to see that cultural change, through the pandemic and even before it, whereby landlords are increasingly more willing to let properties to independents.

We are also seeing a major change in lease terms. Rents have come down in the marketplace; lease terms have got shorter; and there has been a move towards turnover rents, which incentivise landlords to work more closely with their tenants. That is a positive step forward. Whether that stays in the market is another issue because, as the market picks up, a lot of landlords, particularly the smaller ones, are nervous and uncertain about such leases, mainly because they do not understand the businesses that their occupying enterprises are running—and they are expected to support them, so that is another new set of skills that they are expected to have.

In addition, there is a general lack of transparency in the property market. To pick up on a point that Martin Avila made, how can the stakeholders work together and collaborate if the landowners are unknown? Transparency is a major issue in the Scottish property market.

Going back to a previous question, I note that planners are now expected to evidence base any local plans that are created in the future. How can they do that without understanding who the users, occupiers and owners of the properties are? That issue of data transparency is an important hurdle to get over in order to support further development.

Martin Avila: May I come in on one point?

The Convener: If it is brief. We are trying to make progress.

Martin Avila: Yes. Sorry, convener.

We have to end false equivalence. Some of the previous Scottish Government rental guarantee schemes were there for developers to be able to take risks in order to develop new housing stock, but they were not necessarily open to community owners. We were therefore telling the private sector that its risk would be underwritten by the state, because the rental income guarantee scheme guaranteed that it would receive an income, but that was not open to socially focused organisations. Often, as a state, we say that we understand that private enterprise is risky, so we will incentivise and de-risk it, and it will get to privatise the value that is captured. However, when it comes to community organisations that want to socialise the economic value that they create, we say that we are really not sure that they can carry their plan out without failing. We have to end that false equivalence and treat socially

focused enterprises in the same way as we treat private enterprise.

Fiona Hyslop: So do you recommend rental guarantees for social enterprises that provide housing in town centres?

Martin Avila: Yes. Community Land Scotland produced a great report called “Urban Dwelling: A Vision for Urban Community-led Housing in Scotland” that made recommendations about specific funds that could focus on the development of community-led housing. The funds for housing development should also be made available to social enterprise and community landowners.

The Convener: That brings us neatly to Colin Beattie’s line of questioning.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): It all comes down to money, at the end of the day—how much we can invest in communities and where that money comes from. It is quite clear that a good chunk of that money will have to come from the public purse or, in other words, from the taxpayer—us around the table. Given that budgets are tight nationally and locally, where should that taxpayers’ money be focused in order to see the best result in terms of improving our town centres?

Martin, can I ask you to start off?

Martin Avila: I suppose that I threw down the gauntlet, so why not have it back? I will answer the question in a second, but first I want to say that we cannot focus just on state intervention. We need to focus on investment that allows common and social ownership—common, local, co-operative ownership—of schemes that can deliver real revenue into the future. Using whatever potential each town has to generate income through the assets that are available in that town is what community wealth building is all about. It is about saying that we cannot focus on economic development just through attracting external capital, which then extracts value; we also have to look at social economy development, through the grown-up lens of economic development.

Colin Beattie: All of that needs money in the first place to prime it. What you say might be the case once a community enterprise—whatever it is—is generating income, but that usually happens a little bit down the line. When a community enterprise goes into operation, it usually takes two, three or maybe more years to start generating the kind of revenue that would enable sustainability into the future.

Martin Avila: Yes, yes. Every single enterprise, deputy convener—

Colin Beattie: Where does the money come from in the first place if it does not come from the

public purse? Are you saying that you will be able to get private investors to come in?

Martin Avila: I think that there is a range of business models that are looking at shared forms of ownership. I do not think that any of those things is off the table.

To come back to the question of where the money from the public purse should go, I am saying that it has to be invested in schemes that have the potential to deliver more economic value in the future.

What are the asset classes that deliver the largest economic return? They are simply land ownership, property ownership and, at the minute, energy ownership. I would like to see investment focused on allowing community development trusts and social enterprises to gain a bigger stake in asset ownership—which would be shared asset ownership—because only through asset ownership and the development of those assets to deliver future economic value can this situation be turned around.

Colin Beattie: Allison Orr, I will ask you a question on this. We have looked at different town centres. Some that are in relatively affluent neighbourhoods seem to be able to be self-sustaining, because people have money to spend. What about the communities, which perhaps are in a majority, where there is not that spare cash? The amount of money that will be coming through is restricted by the community itself and the wealth that it has.

Regeneration will help to create more wealth in the long term, but how do you deal with that disparity? What sort of model do we need for the more deprived communities to make them more sustainable, and to give them something that they want that will generate money and attract people in?

Dr Orr: That is the million-dollar question. You are right that, once we have a viable place, it becomes self-sustainable and keeps going. The trick is to initiate that. I think that it is really down to redistribution of wealth in some way, whether through the tax system or in some other way.

Looking at towns and city centres, we know that there has been a lot of criticism of business rates and the burden from them that falls on retailers and the leisure sector. A counterargument is that there is an opportunity to raise revenue through an online taxation system that targets online retailers, which a lot of the time benefit from high revenues and lower costs because they situate out of town. If money were raised in that way, it would take some of the burden off the business occupiers in town centres, and that money could be redistributed within our town centres. That would be about targeting the places that you refer to,

where the wealth is not there, in order to help establish them.

Colin Beattie: So, you mean an online digital tax, which would be hypothecated to a particular use, which in this case would be regenerating town centres.

Dr Orr: That is certainly what a lot of people in the property industry have been advocating for a while. They feel that, for many years, the burden has fallen on retailers in town centres, which is no longer viable. After all, the retail model that they have operated is also no longer viable because of competition and rising operational costs.

Colin Beattie: The argument has been made that retailers in the centre of towns want their business rates to be reduced by using an online digital tax. We are suggesting that that money be hypothecated to regenerating town centres, which would mean that there would be less revenue for central Government. How do we work that one out?

Dr Orr: That is a difficulty.

Colin Beattie: Yes. Money is always difficult.

Dr Orr: Yes. In America, they have a tax credit system to encourage development, particularly in residential accommodation. For making such an investment, companies get tax credits against their corporation tax liabilities. That is another option, which has not been considered in the United Kingdom but which has proved to be successful in America.

Colin Beattie: Pauline Smith, how do we ensure sustainability? Money cannot be going into the community for 10, 20, 30 or 40 years. There are so many communities that need help and support that it would be beyond any Government to do that. How do we get sustainability in place, especially in more deprived communities where that is more difficult to achieve and might take longer?

Pauline Smith: I will pull on personal experience. For the past 17 years, I have worked in greater Easterhouse in Glasgow, which is the number 1 deprived neighbourhood in Scotland.

My experience of working in and managing a development trust is that you need a mix of everything. You need a mix of start-up funding that allows you to run youth projects and social activities that work on confidence building and employability—things that perhaps do not make money—and you need a mix of funds that allow you to trade and create business ideas.

Development trusts have had the supporting communities fund for many years, and an element of that was always going to be time limited. It was about business models—helping you and giving

you advice and support to create an enterprise. It was very much about what Martin Avila was saying.

Development trusts are creative and innovative about what they do, as are social enterprises. They want to be sustainable, but they need start-up investment to allow them to do that, as well as business support. A lot of community enterprises have the expertise, drive and creativity from their client group in what they want to do, whether that is reuse, recycling, making clothing or whatever. There is an enterprising part of all community enterprises and development trusts, but they need additional support. It goes back to what I said about legal requirements and VAT—they need support from experts in all those things to allow them to get to the next level and be sustainable.

That goes alongside the asset side of things. Lots of communities will see derelict or vacant land that they could do something with, whether they put a tie on that or use community benefit clauses, which are fine for private enterprises. With community enterprises, they need to think about what will make them money right from the start.

Colin Beattie is absolutely right. In years gone by, money would be ploughed into deprived areas, year after year, because there was no business model in place. A lot of us do not like to talk about business models because we are charities or community organisations and it is all about the people. However, we have had a reality check and, over the years, more and more organisations have had to become more businesslike. They have had to think about how to sustain themselves, because the money that was being ploughed in was not going to be there for ever. It would be nice if some of that start-up money then moved to another area.

Development trusts and community organisations understand that, although it is nice to have a pot of core funding invested in their organisation, they also need to earn their own money so that they have the freedom to do what they want with it in their organisation or community. Funding has ties; there are criteria and outcomes to meet, so there is not the same flexibility. The minute an organisation starts earning its own income, it has the flexibility to try an idea or do something with the money.

I do not know whether that answers your question. There has to be a mix. The supporting communities fund has definitely been a success for the organisations that have received it because it has a business element to it. It was time limited, so more investment in that and business support would be good.

Colin Beattie: Let me ask about another aspect of that.

The Convener: Please be brief, as we must make some progress.

Colin Beattie: In my experience of regeneration in my area, organisations get off to a great start, with a lot of ideas in the community. They then get some property, which may be given to them at a peppercorn rent or whatever, and suddenly they are bogged down in maintenance and renting. They lose their focus, and they become a rather desperate landlord. How do you avoid that?

10:15

Pauline Smith: If they are a landlord, it depends what they are doing in the building. You and I have personal experience, and know of others' experience, of where people are thriving because they have the freedom to do what they will with a building. Yes, there are maintenance costs and everything else. We have talked about net zero, and that is a great opportunity to enable organisations that own an asset to invest in it. Again, it comes down to money, but where there is investment in making buildings net zero, refurbishment, maintenance and all of that will get sorted.

A lot of assets need a lot of work. As Martin Avila said, there is a reason why local authorities are giving those buildings away: they need a lot of work, they may be derelict or whatever, and there is an opportunity to fix some of those problems. Sometimes people just take a sticking-plaster approach by fixing the hole in the roof or doing this and that. There is investment in refurbishing buildings, facilities management and so on—those things are all rolled into one, in my view—but more investment to address issues around net zero, climate change and so on could be a long-term solution for the environment as well as for the sustainability of community organisations.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning to the panel. I have a couple of questions—I will direct the first one to Pauline Smith and then come to Martin Avila.

We are talking again about public funds. We know that Scottish councils are under real financial pressure, as they have been for a number of years. Will you give your opinion on the calls from the Scottish Property Federation and SURF for more resource at local authority level, particularly with regard to town champions, development officers and others within communities to support regeneration and new ideas on that side?

Pauline Smith: I will be honest—I am not 100 per cent up on the town champion side of things but, as I said earlier, we do not need to reinvent

the wheel. As we have talked about, we have community anchor organisations and development trusts in these neighbourhoods, and we could invest in and develop them. They are not exclusive; they are always looking for new people to get involved.

If local authorities understood the importance and power of community anchor organisations that are already in the neighbourhood and they embraced that power, we could do things. Various things have come into communities at a lot of levels over the years, as I have seen. If we simply build on what we have, we do not need to create another layer. I worry very much that there are sometimes layers upon layers, and nothing goes. We can invest money in something new, but we are probably also still investing in the thing that existed before it.

I am not against the community champion idea, but why not make it a community anchor organisation that already exists? That approach might not work for every neighbourhood, and we can create start-ups—as we talked about—if something does not already exist. However, if something exists, and community organisations can work and be strong together and have a strong local voice, we should build on that. Local authorities should be embracing that instead of wanting to create something new. Does that answer your question?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: It does. An issue that we have seen in a number of areas with regard to economic development and support is that there are almost too many options and opportunities, and different pots. Is that a problem in this field? It can be quite confusing for a local community, a town or a local high street to find the right support for their area.

Pauline Smith: Yes—definitely. People who manage community organisations are asked to go to three, four or five different meetings—hub meetings, sector meetings, planning meetings and so on—to network. It is very difficult to try to work all of that out, and to get everyone round the table to make a decision. That is an issue.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Before I move on to put my questions to Martin Avila, I want to ask about some of the larger national bodies. A lot of public bodies have a role in helping with regeneration and support, whether that involves tourism or the arts, or whether they are economic bodies. What are the key bodies for that regeneration and support? How well do they co-ordinate and engage with communities?

Pauline Smith: It is hard to say. I do not have personal experience of all the ones that you are talking about, so it would be unfair of me to have an opinion on all of them, to be honest. The DTA

works with various bodies, but it would be unfair of me to say how each individual community is. I have experience of the heritage trusts and some tourism bodies in the communities in which I have worked, but it would be unfair of me to answer your question exactly, so I would be worried about doing that.

If we can put citizen panels and various other measures that have been talked about into the proposed local democracy bill, it will be an excellent opportunity to revise and revitalise things. I am saying not that we should put in another layer, but that we should revitalise or restructure the existing layers. The local democracy bill and the town centre action plan review—I read the report—will move forward, I think. Everything that the committee is talking about on town centres goes hand in hand with the democracy stuff.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I put the same questions to Martin Avila. First, how well is local government funded to provide support? I am asking about on-the-high-street support and, for example, local champions and development officers. My second question is on the wider role of the larger bodies such as the heritage lottery fund, arts bodies, tourism bodies and other economic bodies. How well do they co-ordinate? Does the approach make it easy enough for people who enter the field to get the help and support that they need?

Martin Avila: I do not think that many of the colleagues round the table would not welcome local government having more resources to invest in our local communities. That is simply the situation that we have been in for the past 15 to 20 years. However, I am not convinced that the creation of a time-limited post with a specific name in every local authority across Scotland will have some sort of transformative impact on our high streets or on the economic levels in our communities. The important point is that, as Pauline Smith said, there should be specific measures that not only deal with the actors who happen to be on the ground, but specifically focus on what they want to try to achieve. Let us face it: short-term limited posts with vague outcomes that are cookie-cutter applied across the country will simply not work.

If you are asking which are the important institutions that play a role in local economic development and the development of a social economy, the answer is that every one of them has a role to play. The issue is how we fund partnership working and what is important in that regard.

I take colleagues back to the example of Galson in the Isle of Lewis, where there is a community-owned estate. I think that it is the largest

community-owned estate in Scotland. It owns a significant amount of land in the north-west of Lewis. The community there talked about how it was able to create effective partnership working in the local community and alongside the local authority.

We cannot just change the power dynamics. It is important to put the community anchor organisations in charge of the partnership working, and not have somebody parachuted in from the outside who decides that everybody is supposed to work and get along in a way that simply does not happen in the commercial sector—or, to be frank, in the political sector. We need to empower community organisations that are already based in communities.

For what it is worth, my view is that, fundamentally, things changed in Galson and things will change elsewhere when we put the co-operatively managed community organisations in charge of significant economic assets. Once the community in Galson had a wind turbine that was generating several millions of pounds in revenue, it decided what it was going to do and it said to the public bodies and local anchor institutions, “This is what we’re doing. Are you coming along?” That fundamentally changed the power dynamics.

We talked earlier about how we change the dynamics in deprived communities. It is simply a matter of the asset ownership and revenue outflows. We have to reverse those. Typically, those communities have been underinvested in, which is why they are deprived in the first place. They are deprived because the development of locally owned economic assets has been underinvested in and because they generally suffer from negative capital outflows.

Fundamentally, we have to address two issues. First, are communities creating wealth that flows back into them or do we have an extractive model that exports economic value? Secondly, what is the asset ownership like at an individual level and at a social and co-operative level?

The Convener: The enterprise agencies will be coming in to give evidence next week. I think that you mentioned a Highlands and Islands project. That area has Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the south of Scotland has South of Scotland Enterprise, and the rest of Scotland is served by Scottish Enterprise. The focus of the two regional enterprise boards is different, because they are involved in community trusts. Is that an issue? Do you see a benefit in HIE and South of Scotland Enterprise being involved in that type of work?

Martin Avila: Instead of providing an individual assessment of each organisation, convener, I will reframe the question slightly. Is it worth while for the enterprise agencies to focus on developing

social capital alongside economic capital? Does the inclusion of a social mission in an enterprise agency make a difference to the outputs? The answer is yes.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Good morning, everybody. My first question is for Pauline Smith. We have heard in other evidence sessions about an oversupply of retail premises. You have talked very positively about Huntly Development Trust with regard to community-empowered creativity, but what role do you see for development trusts and social enterprises in repurposing properties? You have also talked about the complexity of the legal aspects. That will be one barrier, but I suspect that there will be others. Can you say something about those two areas?

Pauline Smith: Huntly Development Trust is a good example, but there are many more. As I said, if we are talking about town centres, I think that the minute that you give something to a community and say, “This shop or building can be yours—what are you going to do with it? It’s open to ideas from you guys”, they might not have an idea already, but they will eventually come up with things that none of us will have thought about. It could be the granny in the knitting or sewing club, the youth making pizzas, or anything. We need to open things up and give people the freedom to be creative, instead of saying that a property has to be, say, a retail shop. It could be an upcycling shop or whatever. Huntly now has a cinema, for instance, and there are plenty of other examples of community-run businesses.

As I think Allison Orr said, the minute that we put those things into town centres, they totally revitalise them, because they bring the community with them. Instead of, say, a Marks and Spencer store or some faceless enterprise going into a property, we get an enterprise that has been created by 20 or 30 local people in the community, who bring their families, their friends and everyone else along, and it trickles out from there. That is the power of that approach.

Michelle Thomson: You see the primary role of the community as being to generate ideas. That leads me on to my next question, which is probably for you again, and for Martin Avila. There is obviously a great deal of sympathy in Government and the committee with regard to such community-led initiatives; indeed, I would say that it is endemic. However, what if we look at it from the other side and think about risk? If we are talking about Government funding for some kind of partnership or initiative, there will be a really quite stringent due diligence process with regard to not just the funding side of things, but people’s experience in operating in such a market and the

risk in that respect. We have seen community-based trusts come and go for exactly the reason that was highlighted earlier: people come in and then lose interest.

I would appreciate it if we could hear your reflections on how we strike the right balance between social and capital incentives, but also—this takes us back to the backdrop that money is not infinite—how we make an accurate assessment of risk.

Pauline Smith: There is a role for the DTA, CEIS and others in that regard. That is what we are there to support. We need to catch that sort of thing early enough and provide all the available training and support.

It does not matter whether people are in a deprived area or an affluent one; a training element will still be required, be it for governance, the legal or the finances. There could also be a mix of private businesses involved in this. For example, one of the banks gives staff time off to work with community-led enterprises, and there can be private investment of time and expertise. Community organisations in general and development trusts now have a mix of people on their boards because they realise that they need the expertise. Community led means being community led, and the majority of the approach will be community led—that is the core of it. That will never change, but bringing in a co-opted accountant or legal representative to sit on a board can be really positive.

10:30

I would not want that to be forced, however, because there is also experience in deprived areas. For example, I know of accountants in deprived areas. The skills are sometimes there, but it is important to have back-up support from agencies such as the DTA and CEIS, to have hand holding when that is required, or even to have someone just to vent to sometimes about going through something. Working in a community can be very hard, and not everyone has the same opinion. We will always run up against people who have slightly different opinions or a different vision. Having someone who can come in and just be there to support people can be very helpful to get the vision and not let it fold, and to not let fatigue negatively affect what people are trying to do.

Michelle Thomson: Can I have some reflections from Allison Orr and Martin Avila about the risks that are associated with development trusts? I emphasise that they are a good idea, but I want to explore that a wee bit.

Dr Orr: I do not have any experience of development trusts.

Martin Avila: I want to say a couple of things. You asked how we see the role of social enterprises and community development trusts. I do not see them just at an ideation phase. That risks going back into the space in which we say, “That’s the nice community stuff over there, but the hard economic development questions are here, and that’s where everybody else makes the real decisions.” To put it quite simply, I see social enterprises and community development trusts as part of a pluralistic mix that owns, manages and develops assets in towns and cities across Scotland.

On risk, I think that the situation is that one in five of the properties that are owned by overseas investment vehicles and one in four of the properties that are owned by institutional investment vehicles are lying empty. There is a real risk that, if we rely solely on distant economic and financial institutions to play a role in the civic development of our towns and cities, we will find ourselves in the situation that we are in now. We are having to have a public inquiry into what has gone wrong and how we can change that.

Of course there are community enterprises and development trusts whose growth cycle is not entirely linear. There are periods in which they are strengthened and periods in which they do not grow as much—sometimes they might even go backwards. However, there is exactly the same story in any economic enterprise. There is the idea that every single economic enterprise has to be successful and must continue to grow. I understand that a level of scrutiny should be afforded to investments from the public purse, but that might not need to happen when people are risking their own capital under their own steam. However, we need to have a long-term vision.

Folks who gave evidence in the previous committee meeting said that everybody is absolutely on board with the idea that we need to have mixed use in our town centres. Everybody, even the Scottish Property Federation, argued that point. We need a greater mix of ownership in city centres as well.

Michelle Thomson: I think that we all agree on that. Are you aware of data being collected? You have given the example of institutions’ properties lying empty. That is an example of where we might gather data. Are you aware of anyone collecting data that adds weight to the opinions?

Martin Avila: A number of think tanks, some of which are based down south, such as Power to Change, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and Common Wealth, have gathered a great amount of data. I would be happy to submit some of those reports.

Michelle Thomson: It would be useful to have that data set for Scotland, as well.

Martin Avila: Yes.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I want to follow up on Michelle Thomson's questions about the ownership of properties in our town centres. Derelict properties are a big issue for us that people constantly raise. I will bring in Allison Orr first of all. Absent landlords—Martin Avila mentioned such ownership—can often ask for unrealistic rents, or unrealistic prices for the sale of their properties.

Recently, we visited the Midsteeples Quarter in Dumfries, which is my home town. One of the properties that the project was interested in probably had a value of about £100,000, but it was sold a few years ago for £700,000 and the owners were still asking for an astronomical fee. Why do pension funds and others hold on to properties that are clearly declining in value? What do we need to do to, in effect, wrestle the properties off them or ensure that they bring derelict properties up to a suitable standard so that they are habitable?

Dr Orr: I have been collecting data on Glasgow and Edinburgh city centres, where institutions no longer hold that much property, particularly retail assets. They have largely moved out of the market and have been replaced by smaller property companies, overseas vehicles and a lot of overseas investors, particularly private investors in self-invested personal pensions. There has been a real change in the ownership structure within our cities, and I expect that the same is true at town level.

Colin Smyth: What is the incentive for an overseas investor to hold on to a property that is sitting empty and derelict on the high street?

Dr Orr: I question the argument that they do so because they are holding out for too much rent. My research has identified the fact that rents have come down. Many landlords now lease their properties for zero, or pretty close to zero, rent. It is the burden of business rates that is putting off a lot of occupiers. Landlords who are sitting there with unrealistic expectations are few and far between. The pandemic has brought a lot of landlords to their senses. It might have been the case previously that landlords were holding out for too much rent, but a lot of them have adjusted.

Why do investors hold on to properties? They do so because property is opportunistic capital. They are waiting for the opportunity to redevelop the units. There is the example of shopping centres, which we see a lot. In Glasgow, there is talk of Buchanan Galleries being knocked down and replaced by a neighbourhood district. Landsec owns that land, which has a large property rate. At

the bottom of Buchanan Street, there is the St Enoch centre, which was owned by an American private equity company that subsequently handed back the keys to the banks. The banks are drawing up a master plan that involves dividing up the asset and developing it as part of a 10-year strategy.

Large property companies that have the assets, skills and expertise are being proactive. They realise that the value of their assets has fallen, and they are doing something about that. Investors that are sitting there are unable to be proactive either because they were naive about property and did not realise what would be expected of them at some point or because they do not have the assets—they might have bought the asset on the back of debts, and the banks might be nervous about lending any more money.

Colin Smyth: Presumably, there is a difference between Buchanan Galleries and Dumfries High Street. Nobody will be queuing up any time soon to build a shopping centre on Dumfries High Street, so why are those properties held on to? Is it the same issue relating to investors not having the money to get the work done?

Dr Orr: In relation to the notion that investors with unrealistic expectations are holding on to properties, I think that the market has changed. I just think that people cannot find occupiers that are prepared to take on the burden of business rates, which landlords cannot do anything about. Landlords are motivated to rent out their property because they have to service the business rate, which is a large holding cost. Most of the time, they do not hold on to properties just for the sake of it.

Colin Smyth: Martin Avila, you probably do not agree that ownership does not matter; you think that the properties should be in community ownership. That would be a real incentive, because the community, rather than absent landlords, would be driving things.

Martin Avila: I will say a couple of things. Dr Orr clearly has a much better understanding of the statistics and facts on property ownership but, in the end, we need a greater mix of ownership in our town centres. In relation to successful developments, there are clearly issues with fragmented ownership. We need to provide concentrations of ownership of properties that are owned locally, socially or co-operatively, because that can often be the catalyst for development in the rest of the city centre. When everything is fragmented and it is not clear who owns property, it is very difficult to build that critical mass.

I would not say that ownership is the fundamental question—that is, I am not saying that if there is anything other than community

ownership in a city centre or town centre, it will not work. However, I think that, to have vibrant locally driven town centres, there needs to be a strong element of community ownership.

Colin Smyth: What is the barrier to having more community ownership in town centres at the moment? Is it access to funding or—

Martin Avila: Community ownership has grown over time. The idea of urban community ownership is much newer than the idea of community ownership in the Highlands and Islands, which has had much more time to develop.

To answer some of the earlier questions, I think that there is a strong tradition of community owners taking on more assets once they have developed one successful asset. It will take time to grow that sector. It needs support and collaborative working with local authorities and other public anchor institutions, and it needs to follow a community wealth building methodology that asks how economic value can be captured and developed, and how it can be kept within a town. That has not been the economic model of the past 20 or 30 years, which has been about attracting external capital, leading to a lot of the value leaving towns. We need to reverse that and ask, “What value do we have in the town? How do we capture most of that value, and how can we use that surplus value to create strong economic development in the town all the time?”

Colin Smyth: Pauline Smith, can you say a wee bit about the work that the Development Trusts Association Scotland has been doing with the Scottish Land Commission on the vacant and derelict land project? I visited the High Mill project in Carluke, which is one of the fantastic derelict buildings projects that was supported. When you reviewed the work, you made a number of recommendations. Where are those recommendations? Are they being taken forward by policy makers? What do we need to do to support projects of the type that the trusts support?

Pauline Smith: I will be honest—my knowledge on that is lacking; I have just started, so I have a bit of an excuse. I was going to say that we will forward on the report, but you have obviously seen some of that evidence. I gather that there has been a lot of pilots within that project. It is due to finish around July, and we will not have the total findings until it finishes.

I do not know why people hold on to these assets, but I know of a shopping centre in Glasgow that has a Post Office box address, and five or 10 years down the line people are still trying to find out who the hell owns it. That is a problem. The vacant and derelict land project that DTAS is doing is one of the potential solutions—it is one of

the ways of trying to find solutions and giving communities a helping hand. I am sorry that I do not have more information on that.

Colin Smyth: I am sure that we can follow up where we are with that. That would be great, convener.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): We have talked a lot about how we can keep town centres alive. Much of the evidence that we have heard is about improving hospitality and leisure facilities and encouraging more independent shops, including start-up units and so on. We have also touched on some of the barriers to getting people to live in town centres, such as lack of services and derelict buildings.

I am conscious that Allison Orr has been looking at the issue for a long time and has a lot of data. Which initiatives have been successful in our city centres, and what are the barriers to improving leisure and hospitality facilities in our town centres?

Dr Orr: There has been a contraction in mid-market retailing in our town centres. Fashion has been particularly hard hit in relation to online competition. Some sectors, such as the luxury sector and the value sector, have done well. Independents have started to gain more momentum, and landlords are more willing to accept an independent, mainly because they have had their fingers burnt with multiples, because of the rationalisation of their portfolios, and company voluntary arrangements and administrations. There has been a cultural shift towards independents.

10:45

Independents also tend to be a bit more nimble when it comes to what the consumer wants, and they can adapt to create the experience economy. The customer—the client—now wants an experience. They want to have somewhere to go that is attractive, that will draw them in, and that will encourage them to spend their money and dwell there. City and town centres need to develop that mix of different uses, including leisure or hospitality, but—there is always a “but”—independents have had their fingers burnt with the pandemic and many of them are sitting on a lot of debt. We are also seeing footfall reduce because of the cost of living crisis and the impact of inflation, so I think that any further growth will be slow.

The burden of debt is one of the biggest barriers that we face. Banks are nervous about lending to town and city centre occupiers and property, which is another barrier that we need to overcome.

We need to encourage greater long-term investment in our town and city centres. The natural place to look for that is our financial institutions, but the risk and return profile for investing in the property market in towns and cities has changed, which has put them off. A lot of capital has been moving to the logistics sector and warehousing. The financial institutions will invest in build-to-rent property, but they are very wary when it comes to leisure and retail, so we need to incentivise them there.

Gordon MacDonald: What about the likes of local authorities, local development plans and the classifications—class 1 retail, class 3 hospitality and so on? We have heard some evidence along the lines that there should be a more general town centre category that allows a greater mix. What are your feelings about that?

Dr Orr: I am a bit nervous about that. We have looked at three city centres in England, where since 2014 we have seen the introduction of development rights that have enabled the conversion of offices to residential accommodation. There has been growth there, but a study that University College London undertook on the London market in particular, where such development has been at its greatest, identified that the quality of those builds tends to be quite poor. The units tend to be quite small and they tend to be in the wrong place. Many planners are nervous about moving to an E class. The property industry certainly sees a need for more flexibility, but it is important to achieve that in a managed way.

I believe that we need a much more holistic strategy for town and city centres, possibly with master plans that contain a very clear vision of what they are trying to achieve. Is it about tourism or places to work and live? That vision and a clear framework needs to be in place for each of our city and town centres.

Gordon MacDonald: I am curious to know how many of our local authorities have town centre master plans in place.

Dr Orr: I am not sure how many towns have them. On the cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh are certainly moving towards creating master plans. I believe that Glasgow City Council received some recovery funding and it is devising a master plan for the city centre, but we are sort of running to catch up. We have lots of frameworks and action plans, and we have the city centre living strategy, but we need something coherent that pulls it all together.

We now offer masterplan consent areas. The legislation relates to that in terms of schemes, which suggests that it was really devised for housing developments. However, if it is possible to

harness that framework, which is in place, and link it to master plans that clearly identify areas in our town and city centres where we want to promote more hospitality, creative or leisure uses, that offers an opportunity.

There is another opportunity in relation to the public services that are missing, such as medical practices and dentists. They also create footfall, so getting them into the empty units would be a major step forward.

Gordon MacDonald: We have talked a lot this morning—

The Convener: Sorry to interrupt, Mr MacDonald, but if you can make this the last question, that will be helpful.

Gordon MacDonald: Okay. We have talked a lot this morning about the changing structure of ownership of commercial property. I think that you mentioned something about incentivising investors. Will you expand on what you meant by that?

Dr Orr: We only have to walk round our town and city centres to see that they are looking pretty neglected. There are a lot of buildings that have plants growing out of them and are clearly in need of a bit of loving care. The smaller investors have struggled over the past two or three years. I know that there is not much sympathy for them, but they have not been collecting rental income. In the past, they were able to pass on the repair liability to their occupiers, but occupiers are now looking at renting space on a much shorter-term basis, so they are not interested in maintaining the built environment around them. There needs to be incentivisation for those smaller landlords to look after the assets and stop the blight before it has a major impact and we enter a downward spiral.

The Convener: I thank all our witnesses for appearing before us and contributing to our inquiry.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow a changeover of witnesses.

10:51

Meeting suspended.

10:56

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel. Ian Buchanan is equality and access manager at Disability Equality Scotland; Nicoletta Primo is research and policy officer at Sight Scotland, and Adam Stachura is head of policy and communications for Age Scotland.

I will start the questions. You are probably all aware that the Scottish Government has a number of different strategies for town centres. There is the retail strategy, the 10-year national strategy for economic transformation and the recent response by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to the town centre action plan. Are the needs of your members being recognised in those national plans? Is that the case at local level, for example when local development plans and place plans are being developed? Is there an awareness of your members' needs? Perhaps Ian Buchanan could start.

Ian Buchanan (Disability Equality Scotland): The initial engagement between our members and Transport Scotland on the town centre action plan was good, but we want to see a true universal design process being implemented.

It is important to be realistic. It is great to strive for fully accessible town centres, but there is a host of things that come before that to ensure that people can get to them. Is public transport accessible? Are there shared spaces? Is social housing in and around town centres accessible? All those factors have an impact on people being able to use accessible town centres.

The work that has happened has been good, and there has been good consultation of disabled people, but we want to ensure that that continues. Disability Equality Scotland is the umbrella body for the Access Panel Network. People on the access panels have lived experience, which should be front and centre, feeding into how accessible town centres and universal design can benefit everyone.

The Convener: Adam Stachura, can you comment on that, and on whether the needs of older people are recognised by local authorities in their local development plans and local place plans?

Adam Stachura (Age Scotland): Ian Buchanan said many things that I agree with, so I will not labour those points.

You mentioned some existing Government strategies, but there are others that also have an impact, not least the national transport strategy 2, and coming down the line are national planning framework 4 and "Housing to 2040". All those aspects will interact, which shows the challenge. There are so many strategies, and they might or might not link well together.

A common theme comes from older people. We surveyed the over-50s in the past week, ahead of this meeting, to get a feel for how they buy things, how they use town centres and what their perceptions are. The overwhelming perception was that town centres are dire and failing. There

are lots of examples of good town centres, but that demonstrates that we have quite a long way to go. When we were discussing our—

11:00

The Convener: Did you find that the reasons for that disappointment were the same as those of other generations, or were there particular differences among the older population?

Adam Stachura: I do not know how they differ across the generations. The term "older people" is so broad anyway, so let us look at the over-50s.

The Convener: You did say over-50s. I was a bit concerned by that. *[Laughter.]*

Adam Stachura: I did. I suppose that, from Age Scotland's point of view, that is our market, regardless of whether they identify themselves as older people. People should embrace that description; it is a good thing.

The problem is the type of retail spaces—or the lack of them—and the presence of derelict units. Also, if I look back to our early-stage dementia project in 2018, when we worked with communities across the country on their requirements for dementia-friendly or age-friendly towns and town centres, they mentioned the lack of public conveniences, proper transport links, places to sit, green spaces and mixed-use space that goes beyond retail. Another issue was the need for housing that was not necessarily always on the town-centre stretch but perhaps just behind that. Many of those elements exist already, but those were examples of what people wanted to see improvements in to make their lives a lot easier.

If we look ahead, the idea of 20-minute neighbourhoods is a good one, but we must ask how we can make those a reality for folk who want to travel shorter distances to access the services that they need. As many of the services that people use—such as supermarkets and large retail chains—move out of town, people want more of them to be in town, too, to suit their ability to travel and to take things away. They might not have access to a car or they might be reliant on their free bus pass, for instance. In rural areas in particular, it can be pretty hard for older people to get to where they want to go.

According to our survey, and in other conversations that we have had, people recognise that having mixed-use spaces could present big challenges. What one person wants might not be what someone else can provide, or it might be what other people do not want. Businesses thrive on having customers. It can be quite a tricky landscape.

I am sorry if I am going on for too long, but I want to mention the Scottish Retail Consortium report that was published this morning, which is pretty interesting. It looks at how town centres could be impacted by a drop in sales. At the same time, the consumer prices index is now at the highest level that it has been in 40 years. Therefore, retailers face big challenges in going into such spaces and filling units in the first place. However, those are challenges not just for the retail sector but for the housing, entertainment, hospitality and arts sectors. There is certainly a challenge in our town centres.

The Convener: Thank you. Good morning, Nicoletta. Will you say a bit about the strategies that are around at the moment and whether they recognise the needs of your members?

Nicoletta Primo (Sight Scotland): I speak on behalf of Sight Scotland, and I will respond in that capacity as we look at the challenges that people with sight loss have when they access their town centres. I echo the earlier comments of Ian Buchanan and Adam Stachura, which I will not repeat.

As we have seen with the introduction of spaces for people during the pandemic, for example, those schemes were sometimes rushed through quite quickly and did not always take into account the needs of people with disabilities and those with sight loss in particular. For example, having shared spaces is not always feasible for many people who experience sight loss. Not knowing where the kerb ends or where the road begins is extremely dangerous, and can mean the difference between a blind or partially sighted person leaving their house or not doing so at all. An example of that in Edinburgh city is the new quarter that includes the Omni centre and St James Quarter. That was already a busy area but now there is not particularly good delineation between the cycle path and the pavement. For someone with sight loss, that is really difficult to navigate, as members of the Parliament have raised previously. Although we want our town centres to look aesthetically pleasing, we must be mindful of feedback from the people whom we work with that such schemes are not serving them particularly well.

When we look at the figures that we have about people who are experiencing sight loss in Scotland, we take an intersectional approach, which includes looking at the number of women and people from ethnic minorities who experience sight loss. Obviously, age is also a contributing factor to those with sight loss. When we take all that into account, we really must think about the groups, proportions or characteristics of people who are more likely to use our town centres. When we are designing what a city looks like and what a

town centre provides, those people need to be more at the forefront. We must do better at reaching out to them earlier and throughout the process, to make sure that it meets their needs.

One in five people aged 75 or over and one in two people aged 90 or over—of whom nearly two thirds are women—live with sight loss, and people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds have a greater risk of losing their sight. Therefore, it is important that we do a little more to reach those people. They are not hard-to-reach people. It is our job, as well as the job of the members of this Parliament and of local authorities, to make sure that we do a bit more work around that.

A good example of that is the Ardrossan connections project, which is a cycle path project that we have commented on. The project has an interactive session taking place in Glasgow, and a couple of outreach workers and habilitation workers are going to it, to provide comment, from the perspective of sight loss, about what they think the new cycle path scheme would look like, with regard to how accessible it is not just for the people who are using it but for the people who are interacting with it. Spending the time to do that is valuable because, ultimately, that will bring about a better result for everybody in the community, not just for the people who use that particular element of it.

The Convener: Thank you. The next question is from Maggie Chapman.

Maggie Chapman: I apologise for the fact that I might need to leave before the evidence session finishes; I thank the convener for letting me get my question in early. I also refer colleagues to my entry in the register of members' interests: a few years ago, I worked for a visual impairment charity for a while.

In their introductory comments, witnesses spoke about the need to bear in mind access. What are your thoughts around support for people who have disabilities or for older people who are looking to be business owners and start companies? Is there enough support for those making the shift from passengers or consumers to business owners and operators? What barriers have the organisations and people who you represent identified? That question goes first to Adam Stachura.

Adam Stachura: A large part of our social enterprise work is to support older workers in workplaces. We have an ageing population that will be working way beyond the traditional state pension age years. There are lots of opportunities in that, and folk will need to work, because one in five 55 to 64-year-olds in Scotland lives in poverty, which is scandalous, and 15 per cent of pensioners are in poverty. The barriers include their knowing where to start or the perception that

they are too old to start. Some institutional barriers exist for older people, such as getting into further and higher education or accessing finance at a certain age. The barriers are not just about personal finance but about the banks and institutions considering the risk levels of lending to older people. However, there is an opportunity, and a lot of older people who have assets and wealth might want to make such a shift or change career.

By the end of the furlough scheme, the largest group of people on it were older workers, who were probably hanging on until the end. We are not yet entirely sure what has happened to them. They did not know what was going to happen, and they were on a cliff edge in relation to whether they would be taken back on. The outcome will have a big impact on their chances in later life. There is a group of people who could contribute tremendously but, if I am perfectly honest, people who are looking to set something up will not really know where to turn in the first instance.

Huge numbers of older people are digitally disconnected: half a million over-60s in Scotland do not use the internet and 600,000 do not have a smartphone. If everything is just online, and people are told to have a look at a website or Twitter feed, that is immediately exclusionary, so there will be lots of fiery hoops for people to jump through. That is consistent for all ages, but some particular issues might exist more for older people than for other ages.

Maggie Chapman: Nicoletta Primo, do you want to come in on that as well?

Nicoletta Primo: Adam Stachura talked about some older people not being as digitally connected. When that lack of connection is coupled with sight loss, for example, we are talking about alienating a huge number of people. The majority of the veterans whom we work with through Sight Scotland Veterans will not have an email address and they will not access the internet. If they do, they will require support and help.

If we look more broadly than older people with sight loss, town centres have huge potential in providing spaces to provide employment for people with sight loss and other disabilities. Having a disability should not be a barrier to work, to achieving quality and fulfilling employment, and to developing your skills and career.

I will give you an anecdote. Kevin works in our reception. He is an amazing guy with sight loss. Yesterday, he said, "You know, if I didn't have sight loss, maybe I would have become a police officer. Maybe I wouldn't have stuck around here for so long." That is very telling. Because of his sight loss, he sees his current role as being the

only one that he felt that he can do. It is where he feels safe and supported, and we are a disability supportive employer. However, that just proves that there is a huge amount of potential in town centres and the role that they could play in developing people's skills by providing them with meaningful employment.

If people are choosing to move online to do their shopping because of convenience, we have to answer a much bigger question about the role of town centres. They have traditionally been places of social connection and hubs where people get out and about to get together with other people and be part of a community. That has been missing a little bit. There is still a huge need for that, particularly when we think about older people and loneliness.

More generally, there might not be so many programmes of employment that are tailored for people who are blind and partially sighted. If for-profit businesses are moving out of our town centres, could we replace them with things such as social enterprises with grants specifically for people with a disability to set up their own business? Is there support for people to do that?

That is a massive question, but it is an area of huge potential. It would also have a knock-on effect on people's health and wellbeing, particularly around the ideas of social isolation, purpose, and feeling as though you are part of a community, which a lot of people are still missing.

Maggie Chapman: That is really helpful. Ian Buchanan, what support should ideally be made available for people with disabilities who want to start or grow their business?

Ian Buchanan: I completely agree with the points that Nicoletta Primo and Adam Stachura have made. We know that there are disabled people who want to start and run their own businesses. At the moment, I am not aware of anything in my capacity as quality and access manager that can offer targeted support to disabled people who want to set up their own business. There is nothing similar to the access to work scheme or the access to politics scheme in which disabled people are supported and guided. I know that we have the Business Gateway, and, a few years ago, we worked with it on how to make its policies and practices more accessible.

The key thing—this also covers town centres—is that the built-in barriers are built in by choice. We make those decisions. Architects and town planners decide to build in those barriers. There is no malice there; it is just a question of attitude. Therefore, getting to those attitudes is key. If we can win people's hearts and minds and show them that there is an accessibility issue with the steps at the front of a hotel, for example, that can be of real

benefit to disabled people. Something similar to the access to work scheme could be really beneficial. Inclusion Scotland has done a lot of work on that.

Maggie Chapman: That is really helpful. There is something about culture in that.

Ian Buchanan: Yes.

Maggie Chapman: You mentioned perceptions and culture is a big part of that.

I will leave it there, convener.

The Convener: Thank you. Fiona Hyslop is next, followed by Alexander Burnett.

Fiona Hyslop: We want our town centres to be vibrant places to live, work and play, and that means that we must work. Retail and hospitality employers are major parts of our town centres. What more can be done in those sectors to ensure fair work opportunities for older people and people who have disabilities? What will be the benefits to town centres if we can get this right?

I thank you for your submissions to the inquiry. I have read them and they are very interesting. Nicoletta Primo has said quite a lot about that already, so perhaps we can go to Ian Buchanan, then Adam Stachura.

11:15

Ian Buchanan: We hear often from people on access panels and our members that the Equality Act 2010 is not being enforced as it should be, and that the onus is put on the disabled person, for example. If you are providing a public service, you have to provide it in the same way to everybody. How often do we see disabled access to a building round the back next to the bins and through a shabby door that has not been maintained? The feedback from people on access panels is that they, as disabled people, want to see Government and stakeholders on their side, supporting them to access the services and provisions in their town centres, in order to save them from having to get in their cars and drive to shopping centres, such as Braehead or Silverburn.

Fiona Hyslop: And employees, not—
[Inaudible.]

Ian Buchanan: Yes, that applies to employees as well. With regard to being supported as an employee in an organisation, we polled the access panels about a year ago and asked people what their ideal job would be and what the barriers were to their getting that ideal job. We did not necessarily want to know the specifics, but we wanted to understand the general barriers that are holding disabled people back from gaining meaningful employment. The most common barriers included the lack of inclusive

communication. For example, disabled people might struggle to understand where to get the bus or where to get off the bus, which train to get or what their shift times were. Perhaps the information was not provided to them in an accessible format.

Another barrier was accessibility of buildings. Again, that goes back to choices that have been made by planners and architects, and it feeds into how the Equality Act 2010 is being upheld for employees. Those things are interlinked, from our perspective.

Adam Stachura: That was a great question. I want to reflect on the fact that, just before Covid reached our shores, we had been working with businesses and communities—we are still working with them—on various projects. The “Age at work Scotland” programme was one of those. We looked at the idea of older workers in hospitality. Folk might have retired from their regular job and be in receipt of a pension but still need or want to work. We looked at whether hospitality was an attractive proposition for people. We were also looking at the changes to our workforce because people from the EU were leaving post Brexit, which was leaving a gap in that workforce.

Obviously, a lot of that work was stalled, but its aim was to demonstrate an attractive proposition, and to have people realise that older people have fantastic assets—not the least of which is their experience. Their customer service skills are fantastic and they absolutely have the ability to graft.

However, there can be issues with older people’s understanding of what is available to them. We were considering projects and pilot schemes, so that older people could be recruited into the hospitality sector and understand the jobs as something that they could do and that they could work flexibly. If you have retired, your Saturday might not be as precious to you as it would be if you were working 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. You could just change which days you see as being your weekend.

However, people might also be caring for grandchildren or partners. Much of the work is still to resume, but there is scope, there. The work fits with the idea of age-inclusive workplaces that are for everyone, but we need to think about how we recognise people’s caring roles and everything that goes around them, for example.

I am thinking back to the fairly recent launch of the national strategy for economic transformation, which highlighted our population and workforce changes. We have a hugely growing population of retirement-age people and a stagnating and, over the next 10 years, shrinking working-age population, but there is barely a mention in the

strategy of how to support older people and older workers. There was a big focus on entrepreneurship—there could be a place for that, if you think about it, but as I said before, the barriers that exist to becoming an entrepreneur could be challenges—the transition to net zero and the move away from oil and gas jobs. Entrepreneurship was a focus, but the strategy missed a trick by not addressing how we support older workers, get the most out of them and demonstrate their value to our economy.

The strategy itself was a far bigger beast than just that, and everyone will have their niche areas, but I thought that there being no mention of older people was an omission when I read the strategy at a prepublication meeting with the cabinet secretary to reflect on what the future might look like.

Fiona Hyslop: If we want our town centres to be places where not only young people go, should we consider disposable income? Older people might like the idea of older people, like them—if the definition of “older people” means the over-50s, I will embrace my older age—serving them in bars, restaurants and shops. That makes a place more inclusive, and people might spend more because they have disposable income. That might be economically attractive.

Adam Stachura: Absolutely. We should also realise that older people have money to spend, and that there being barriers to their spending it does not help the economy. Getting to a town, having money to spend there and there being places to spend that money is a bit of a chicken and egg situation. If places do not exist in town centres, people do not go there, but if people do not go town centres new things will not open because there is no market for them.

Remember that schemes that were in place during the height of Covid restrictions involved people checking into venues, and having to do so primarily with digital devices. Although the Government made it clear that they could also check in on a paper form, many older people found themselves being excluded because a paper form was not available, which meant that they left the premises. Our chief executive was at a restaurant with his family at which he was able to check in online, but he made a point of asking for a paper copy of the form; it was not available, so he left. That is an example of why businesses need to be inclusive of older people.

You made a very good point about the potential for that to happen, though.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): My questions are about design, delivery and improving town centres. A lot of the stuff that the committee discusses involves high-level policy

and legislation, but most issues relate to quite small things that happen on the ground, so I have a number of questions about how you communicate at the local level.

How do you rate individual town centres? Do you provide awards and do you name and shame the worst and give examples for groups? A huge variety of groups and organisations are looking at improving town centres, and it is not always a simple process to find them. There could be business improvement district teams, community councils, business associations and development trusts. How do you feed detail into those? For instance, in Banchory, which is my home town, would it be possible to see things being rated by those whom you represent?

Given the number of bodies out there with which you need to communicate, the overlap between your organisations and the fact that there are limited resources, how much do you work together in communicating with those groups?

Adam Stachura: We do not rank town centres; we have not even thought about that. It would probably be slightly unfair to rank them, and to do so would be way beyond our capacity.

However, we have worked on age-inclusive towns and cities and are looking to do more of that, and I think that we should do much more of it nationally, across Scotland. We could also look at examples from Manchester and London to see how they have achieved age-friendly status.

We spoke to a lot of older people—with a focus on those who are living with early-stage dementia—about their town centres and what is not working for them. I said earlier that things to do, places to sit and green space are all very important. It is not only about the shops—although, in a recent survey, people also said that shops are part of the issue because the things that they want to spend money on are not there.

We do not necessarily have relationships with local teams. Nicoletta Prima used an example from Ardrossan; we engage with groups there when they come to us. There are so many fragmented initiatives on the go, which is a good thing; they are all done with the best intentions and have good people behind them. However, there are big challenges with getting investment. Such things cost money and there will be structural challenges in respect of what our town centres will actually look like and what can be done with them.

There has been a move towards pedestrianisation of areas, but there are people with accessibility needs who might need to use their cars and park close but cannot. There is a very difficult balance to strike.

We hear a lot about doing more across Scotland, and perhaps we should. There are towns such as Prestwick and Biggar that look good and people like spending time there. Those are only two of the hundreds that exist, and I am sorry for missing out member's constituencies.

Alexander Burnett: —[*Inaudible.*]—Dumfries.

Adam Stachura: I will have a look at Dumfries and can maybe check other places; I remember that you mentioned Banchory, too.

There are challenges with what we can do, but it needs to be recognised that Age Scotland and other organisations are asked to feed back older people's views on hundreds of things every year. That is pretty challenging. We can ask older people across the country for their views on various things, and we can try to feed those back to ensure that their voices are heard. What I have described is an interesting example of what people really think.

Alexander Burnett: Perhaps Nicoletta Primo can say a bit more about how Sight Scotland communicates with the groups that I mentioned, such as BID teams. You lobby MSPs and send us briefings. Do you do the same with those types of organisations?

Nicoletta Primo: I echo what Adam Stachura said: there is so much consultation, at times. That is not a bad thing—it is great—but we have to be mindful of what we ask of people in general, and disabled people in particular. They are volunteering to give up their time, and there is only so much capacity in our organisations to enable us to co-ordinate that, and to reach out and go out to people with sight loss and ask them to give their views on something. It is great that they have the opportunity to do that, but it is also quite burdensome and tiring for people to have to give feedback constantly.

Sight Scotland is considering different models of how we might do that. For example, we are asking whether there are options for people to be paid or remunerated in some other way for giving up their time, because it can be time-consuming to be involved in such things. I do not think that everybody would want, or even feel confident enough, to do that. Reaching people can be challenging, in that regard.

As I said, at the end of the day we provide services, and there is so much more to the people whom we support. We need to balance that with the need to ensure that their views are heard and are at the forefront of policy change.

Organisations work closely together. The real beauty of Scotland's third sector is that disability organisations and other organisations that work with people—those with sight loss, for example—

are really collaborative. That is valuable, and I am pleased that Scotland is a place where we collaborate and share views and ideas with each other.

To go back to the question about how we reach people, I say that decisions about local areas and town centres should, ultimately, be made locally, as far as possible. That is where we get real quality. We need to convey to people that when they share their views and opinions, their views are being seen as meaningful and are listened to. I have heard about that from many people.

One basic example involved a veteran with whom I work. A bus stop was moved from one end of Perth to another, which meant that he could not go to the post office any more. He is very active in his local community—he is on the local community council, he writes to his councillors and all the rest of it. He had asked, "Please don't move the bus stop; it will make it so difficult for me, with my sight loss, to get to in order to go somewhere else." However, he felt that his voice was not heard, and the change happened.

It is true that you cannot please everybody, but there needs to be a little bit more space for people's views, and for people to feel that those views are seen as meaningful and are being considered, rather than simply being part of a tick-box exercise.

Ian Buchanan: We do not rank town centres, either. I know that panels carry out street audits—they will usually spend a day walking up and down a high street and look at the overall accessibility of the town, whether it is Glasgow or wherever. They then submit that street audit to the local council and to community councils, and to businesses up and down the high street, saying what issues they had found with disabled access to premises, or flagging up issues regarding the street itself, to do with bollards or tactile paving, for example. We do not rank town centres, but we try to give feedback that is as constructive as possible in order to flag issues up.

I agree with Nicoletta Primo—at times, there is almost consultation saturation. For Disability Equality Scotland, that comes back to the capacity issue. We are a small organisation and we look after and support 35 or 36 access panels that are spread across Scotland, from Shetland down to Tweeddale. There is only one of me, and my role in the organisation is to support the panels. We need to identify where input would be most meaningful for disabled people. We would support filtering information down to our members and sharing links to the Scottish Parliament website, for example, where people could find consultations in which they might be interested.

11:30

Another example is the involvement of the access panel in East Dunbartonshire in the Kirkintilloch shared space scheme. The panel said that it was not a good idea and said what the issues were for visually impaired—blind and partially sighted—people, but the scheme was taken forward almost regardless of what disabled people thought.

We are in the habit of excusing design that is bad in relation to disability. We say, “It doesn’t matter. It’s disabled people. They can go round the back and use the entrance next to the bins”, even though everybody should be using the main entrance. There is work to do to make sure that disabled people are involved from the beginning. Such things must involve the principle of universal design. We need to make sure that not just Parliament, but town planners, architects and civil society as a whole are aware of the need to bring disabled people into the process.

If you get it right for disabled people, you get it right for everybody else, such as ambulant disabled people and mums and dads with prams; it has a knock-on effect. Getting accessibility right from the get-go and involving disabled people in the process can only be a good thing for society.

Alexander Burnett: Thank you. That is the first that I have heard of those audits, so you might want to share them with MSPs when they happen in their areas.

Gordon MacDonald: One aspect that we are looking at is how to get more people to live in our town centres. One issue that we have is empty property above retail stores.

Ian Buchanan just said that we have to include disabled people in the process and that getting accessibility right at the beginning means that we get it right for everybody. What are the specific challenges relating to the needs of people with disabilities that planners and developers should address when repurposing town centre properties, especially above shops? Many of our traditional high streets have that issue.

Ian Buchanan: High streets are often older and have Victorian or Edwardian architecture. When I think of accommodation above shops, I think of flats that are up narrow closes and stairways. That excludes a fifth of the population right there. Nicoletta Primo said that we cannot please everybody all the time, but we are not talking about a minority of people. One million people in Scotland are estimated to have a disability, although—fair enough—that is not necessarily a physical disability.

Making those buildings accessible so that disabled people can live in a town centre will be a

challenge. It will require consultation with local authorities, building owners and landlords. How do we make a dark, narrow, steep staircase in a close accessible for somebody who uses a powerchair, for example, and avoid pushing them out to other accommodation, which would have a knock-on effect on their being able to use the town centre? It is all interlinked.

Good engagement with access panels is the starting point because they have that lived experience. They know their town centres well and they will be able to tell you what the issues are and where you need to start. I can put you in touch with them.

Gordon MacDonald: Are you aware of any properties that have been converted successfully?

Ian Buchanan: I am not aware of any, off the top of my head. I might think of an example afterwards.

Gordon MacDonald: You can come back to us.

Ian Buchanan: I can come back to you. Off the top of my head, I am not aware of any that have been converted in a high-street setting. There are lots of good examples of accessible accommodation, but not in town centres, unfortunately.

Gordon MacDonald: Nicoletta, I ask you the same question.

Nicoletta Primo: It is a good question. What Ian Buchanan said about ensuring that people are included right from the start is relevant. I would go further and say that they should be included on an individual basis. When people are looking at their housing options or at going into supported accommodation or social housing, there needs to be a more tailored process to decide what that person’s needs are.

Normally, the person who is moving into a property is the person who is best placed to know what they need. Someone we work with was looking to move house in the Linlithgow area. That was a positive example of where the housing officer and ourselves, as a supporting charity, were able to put the case for why that person could not live in a certain house. One reason was that she was a lone parent and another reason involved her access to bus routes to get to nursery, to the shops and to the post office to pay bills. We took a holistic approach, and it was an example of how you can get a better outcome if you start from an individual basis and take a lot of time to look at someone’s circumstances.

As Ian Buchanan has mentioned, converting properties, particularly older properties, is a huge challenge. I do not have the answers for you, but the fact that something is costly does not mean that you should not spend money on it. Converting

properties is 100 per cent worth the money, but it comes down to the question whether that is something that you want to invest significant sums in. Scotland is an old country and we did not design buildings to be particularly accessible hundreds of years ago. However, in the modern age, perhaps we just have to accept that we will have to convert properties, even if it will be costly to do so. It might take a bit of time to modify buildings, but it is worth doing. That is ultimately what that question boils down to. I would like to know whether there are any examples of that, because I have not come across any. I will have a look myself.

Gordon MacDonald: Adam Stachura, your written submission says that only 41 per cent of local authorities had carried out an equality impact assessment on the local development plan. Why do you think that is?

Adam Stachura: Equality impact assessments are often a last-minute thought of whoever is putting policy together. We are asked to take part in loads of these things, but we often say the same things. It is an afterthought; the assessments are not built into the process or mainstreamed. I know that work is being done to mainstream equalities across Scotland but the figure that you mention is quite disappointing.

The submission also says that only 17 per cent of Scottish local authorities have a target for accessible homes. There is a view that they are harder and more expensive to build, but should all homes not be accessible for people of all ages? It is certainly a big barrier.

Our 2020 national housing survey asked older people why they might want to move home. Approximately 41 per cent said that they wanted to be closer to shops and services and 22 per cent said that they wanted to be close to their current local community. There is an appetite there, but delivering is hard. There are 11,000 hectares of vacant and derelict land in urban communities in Scotland, a lot of which are small parcels of land or derelict buildings that might need a lot of remediation to get them to development stage. The bigger developers might not touch those projects, because the return on investment will be low, so the smaller house builders might need to be incentivised to take them on. Many developers might want to build 15 units or so on, but they face barriers such as high fees for the planning work.

We need to look across our town centres—not just at the high street but at the streets behind it—to see where renovation could be done to provide older people's housing, which need not necessarily be some kind of sheltered accommodation. There are some good examples of where that type of housing has been put in place. I used to work in Cupar, where there are

older people's flats by the train station, just behind the main streets—I think that the building is called Eden Court—that are in high demand. There is an appetite for such accommodation but there is not enough older housing. Someone might never need that type of home, but it is a fact that there is not the right mix of type and tenure in Scotland. More older people are looking to rent now—one in five older people are in socially rented homes. However, we are not building enough homes or the right kind of homes.

Those are the challenges. We need to incentivise people to build on those small parcels of vacant land and put in place the necessary planning stipulations, and we have done that for many years in relation to getting microrenewables into buildings. It can take a lot of time to get solar panels installed, but it is not new technology. I have just moved to a new house with solar panels, which is fantastic, but the developers did not put in air-source heat pumps—it still has a gas boiler. We need to think about those kinds of ideas in the future. There are lots of opportunities, but it is hard for the smaller developers who want to take advantage of those opportunities to do so.

Colin Beattie: I direct my first question to Adam Stachura, particularly as he is looking after my interests as a septuagenarian. Are there any good examples in Scotland, the UK or internationally of towns making the necessary changes to become more accessible and disabled friendly?

Adam Stachura: I have already mentioned Prestwick, which I think is a more dementia and age-friendly town.

Colin Beattie: Why is that?

Adam Stachura: They have just gone out of their way to do it. I do not have all the details—you have slightly caught me off guard—but I know that some work has been done in the past on this and that there has been a drive to develop dementia-friendly communities in Prestwick through looking at, for example, pedestrian routes, accessibility to shops and the mix of things for people. That is an example from Scotland that is worth exploring further, but I am certainly aware that those developments are good and well thought of.

Colin Beattie: You might not know this, either, but how did they do that?

Adam Stachura: I do not know exactly, but I can find out more information and pass it on to the committee.

Colin Beattie: I am sure that the committee would be interested in seeing any information that you have to hand.

Adam Stachura: Prestwick is the example that comes to mind right now, but there will be others. I talked earlier about the concept of age-friendly

cities, and Manchester and London seem to have adopted such approaches. Progress on that sort of thing is slow at times, but nevertheless there are examples in the UK. The names evade me at the moment, but some places across the continent have also done this.

The key thing is to ensure that there are no barriers with regard to transport links, accessibility and the ability to move around. We talked earlier about access to shops, which is not just about putting in ramps or not making people go round the back and in among the bins to get in. That is immediately degrading for folks. Why would you want to be put in the position of having to use a buzzer? We have heard how, in the past, people in wheelchairs had to use a buzzer in order to get lifted into banks. Sadly, a lot of bank branches have now left our high streets, but a key driver for people using them was to meet their personal banking needs—not least, people who were digitally disconnected.

Those types of things have been pretty poor. As Ian Buchanan has said, at times the attitude has been “Well, it is what it is”, which is neither fair nor right.

Colin Beattie: I want to put the same question to Nicoletta Primo. Do you have any examples of a town being changed to become more accessible and disabled friendly, particularly for people with sight difficulties?

Nicoletta Primo: To be honest, I have no specific examples, and it is perhaps telling that neither I nor Adam Stachura can point to many off the top of our heads. It might be that we more often hear negative things rather than positive things about accessibility.

One thing that I think will improve accessibility across the board is the pavement parking legislation that has been passed and which local authorities are looking to implement. I believe that that will make a huge difference for many blind and partially sighted people as they navigate their town centres, particularly Glasgow, where pavement parking has been such an issue for people trying to walk down the pavement and not knowing whether there is a car in front of them. Obviously, that legislation needs to be balanced with ensuring access for, say, ambulances and others who need access to a car. Nevertheless, it is an example of national legislation being implemented at local authority level that will have a huge impact on all town centres, and I really look forward to seeing the results as it comes into force. After all, pavement parking has been identified across the board in all our cities and towns as a major access issue.

Like Adam Stachura, I am interested in finding for the committee examples of places that,

according to feedback that we have received, are great to stay in and are accessible. It is unfortunate, though, that we have heard more about the negatives than about those kinds of examples.

Colin Beattie: It would certainly be helpful to know of any places that have succeeded in that.

11:45

Ian Buchanan, I will ask you a slightly different question. Obviously, around the country, town centres in general have a way to go towards becoming disability friendly. What sort of support might be needed, financial or otherwise—for example, through a council providing a resource to give advice—to make that change and move the situation over the line?

Ian Buchanan: There are two aspects. The first is the finances to help local authorities to make the improvements that are desperately needed in some town centres. Similar to what Nicoletta Primo and Adam Stachura were saying, it is sometimes a lot easier to see the negatives than the positives, and I am not aware of any example of a town that has turned itself around when it comes to accessibility.

It goes back to the idea that some of our towns, such as Stirling, for example, grew up through the middle ages and into the Victorian period, and a lot of its infrastructure has been added to and bolted on. It is about how to go in and make changes from a 21st-century perspective and make things more accessible for people who are using powerchairs, for example.

There is definitely a financial aspect to supporting local authorities to make those changes. However, as I said earlier, there is also the softer side of the issue, including changing attitudes and helping people in the offices of architects and town planners to understand that the choices that they make have a direct impact on disabled people’s lives. It is about trying to educate them, in a way, and about bringing disabled people along on that journey to share their lived experience.

Colin Beattie: Generally, from the point of view of sustainability, are you talking mostly about a one-off, perhaps structural, change that would not have a significant on-going cost?

Ian Buchanan: There would be an expensive initial outlay to bring town centres up to an accessible standard. It is about defining what “good” looks like and what “accessible” means, because what is accessible for one person is not necessarily accessible for another.

For example, the avenues project on Sauchiehall Street is dreadful for visually impaired

people, because it has quasi-shared space. However, for somebody in a wheelchair, it is okay, because it is flat and level—albeit that there is a slight gradient up Sauchiehall Street. What is accessible there for a wheelchair user is not necessarily accessible for a blind or partially sighted person. I reckon that that project will have on-going costs in retrofitting it to make it safer for blind and partially sighted people to use. That should not have to happen. What should have happened was good consultation with blind people from the very start.

There will be an initial outlay, but I also reckon that there will be small continued costs in maintaining accessibility infrastructure. Last week, for example, there was a report from England of a blind man who fell on to the railway tracks with his dog, because of a lack of tactile paving. How much would it have cost to maintain tactile paving at the side of the platform? There are small costs in avoiding something catastrophic such as a visually impaired man ending up on the tracks with his guide dog, screaming for help.

Colin Beattie: I have a final question. Is there any one template that would encompass all the requirements of all the disability groups? Has any exercise been done to put such a thing together?

Ian Buchanan: There is not, that I am aware of. It goes back to what “good” looks like and how we define accessibility.

There are various pieces of guidance, such as building regulations that businesses often do not adhere to, even though they should. Then there is supplementary guidance such as BS 8300, which is about good design and the built environment. That is not legally binding but it is best practice, and businesses are encouraged to go beyond it. There are also other bits of guidance from the British Standards Institution, but I do not think that there is one all-encompassing piece of guidance that a business owner could pick up, for example, that would tell them how to make their premises accessible.

Colin Beattie: Would that be desirable?

Ian Buchanan: It would be—definitely.

Colin Smyth: I will follow on from Colin Beattie’s questions. Dementia Friendly Prestwick is based on the dementia friendly communities in Japan, and its work is very much driven by volunteers and by working with Alzheimer Scotland and the local health board. For example, staff in shops have been trained to be dementia friendly. A lot of community work has been done.

Would you like the committee to recommend any specific policy-related or legislative change to support the people whom you represent and drive the work forward? Nicoletta Primo mentioned the

pavement parking ban. Should we ban A-boards on high streets, for example?

Nicoletta Primo: You give a good example about boards outside shops and cafes. During the pandemic, there was a rise in the number of outside tables and chairs, because people were looking to eat outside. That was brilliant for many people—they loved it—but it was extremely challenging and dangerous for many blind and partially sighted people, because there were more pieces of street clutter to navigate.

As Ian Buchanan touched on, there is a culture in which people might not understand or recognise when someone is blind or partially sighted. For example, a lot of people do not think twice about what it means if someone is using a white cane, but not everyone always carries a signifier that they have sight or vision loss. There is a general lack of understanding about the needs of partially sighted people in society, and that impacts how we think about our town centres and how people navigate them.

My organisation would support legislation, perhaps not to ban such signage, but to change the rules on signage on streets and pavements. There are already such rules, but they are not really adhered to. A good example is that, outside our offices, there was a massive road works sign. I thought that it was ironic that there was a massive sign right in the middle of the pavement outside a sight loss charity. It would have been incredibly dangerous and extremely challenging for somebody with sight loss to have navigated around it.

From a policy perspective, there is a lot more work to be done. However, that needs to be coupled with an awareness-raising campaign so that the public know what it is like to try to navigate when you have lost your sight. It is not a case of people being unwilling to change; it might just be a case of people being naive and not having that insight. That is another starting point.

I will quickly comment on what Colin Beattie said about the design of town centres and whether we have a template that fits everybody. The crux of the issue is that localism will look different wherever it is. Although it would be great if we had a template that worked for everyone in every place, that might be really difficult and might not get the best results. That is why the best approach is to work with local people to design their own communities. That will probably take a bit more time, money and investment, but it will yield better results in that sense.

Colin Smyth: I am conscious of the time, but I will give Adam Stachura his “Dragons’ Den” moment. What is the one policy change that we need to make or recommend, or it is just about

ensuring that existing policies are better adhered to?

Adam Stachura: Thank you for that easy question when we have no time at all.

It is very tough. Nicoletta Primo's point about localism and talking to local communities is important. As I have said, town centres across the country look very different, so having one overlaying template might not work so well, and it might be more expensive, but it would be helpful to have certain guidelines. The fact that the committee has invited us here to talk about the issue is welcome, because it often does not get talked about enough. In relation to planning authorities, we should realise what it is like to be in somebody else's position, because that might have an impact on whether we do things the way that they have always been done.

Road signs are a brilliant example. The type of things that go up are a massive obstruction for people, but these are simple things for which there are easy fixes. It is often a bit daft to have them there, as it creates street clutter. It is really tough.

It would probably do the issue justice to have broad guidelines as a starting position. For accessible housing, there is no definition of what an accessible house is. We are working with a range of people to define something a bit sharper for Scotland on that. Looking at accessible town centres will be tricky, but that does not mean that it should not be done. It should be done by people who are far more expert than I am.

The Convener: We need to make some progress, so I will bring in Jamie Halcro Johnston.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I want to put questions to Ian Buchanan and Adam Stachura on the same issue. During and after the pandemic, there have been issues around public toilets being closed, which has limited their availability and therefore limited accessibility for a number of people. From speaking anecdotally with friends and colleagues, I understand that that must have been a concern for older people, people with disabilities and others.

A lot of councils have cut back and closed loos. There have been issues in the Highlands and Islands, in particular, where loos have been vandalised and then closed. Even where there are developments and plans for new toilets or upgrades, they are not always for toilets of the highest accessibility level. For example, they might be disabled toilets but not changing places toilets.

How do we ensure that we not only embed facilities into plans but make sure that they are the right facilities and that it is not just a tick-box exercise? We talked about disabled or older people having their say. If councils are signing off

plans, should there be somebody who is responsible for ensuring that the right facilities are embedded into developments? That is for Ian Buchanan first and then Adam Stachura.

Ian Buchanan: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for your question—I was going to go on and speak about toilets.

You cannot have accessible town centres unless you have accessible toilets, which goes back to what Adam Stachura and Nicoletta Primo have said about there not being an accessibility standard for housing but there being one for toilets. That has existed for years; it is laid out in the building regulations. There are a few different options and layouts for new accessible toilets, but the accessibility standard is there.

With our access panels at Disability Equality Scotland, we see the variation between accessible toilets and the difference is vast. There are ambulant disabled toilets, which are sort of accessible and sort of in line with the building regulations; there are changing places toilets, which are fantastic for people who have profound and multiple learning disabilities; and then there are grotty little cubicles with the emergency red cord tied up, so if somebody were to fall, they would not even be able to hook it with their stick.

As I said, you cannot have accessible town centres unless you have accessible toilet provision that, ideally, is in line with BS 8300, which is the accessible guidance for the built environment and which goes above and beyond the building regulations.

I must admit that I am slightly obsessed with accessible toilets. Wherever I go, I always try to check out what the accessible toilet is like. I had a look when I came to the Parliament building and, unfortunately, the red cord in the accessible toilet was tied up. That is quite common; that is often because a cleaner has gone in to mop the floor, they have tied up the red cord and then they have forgotten about it. However, the idea is that the cord touches or lies on the floor so that, if someone were to slip and fall off the toilet seat, they could reach for the cord or hook it if they have a stick. The cord is often tied up on the grab rails, which are often not colour contrasted with the surrounding walls—white grab rails on white walls, for example—and that is poor for people with visual impairments. My phone is full of pictures of accessible toilets. The variations between them are just outrageous sometimes.

What we would like, and what our members tell us that they would like, is for the current guidance on accessible toilets to be enforced and for businesses and service providers to be made aware that guidance exists. They should speak to their local authorities, who will support them.

Building control and building regulations divisions will support them to implement the guidance, and access panels will be there to support them in maintaining the toilets, as well.

12:00

Jamie Halcro Johnston: So it is a problem already that we need to make sure that we get right going forward. Adam Stachura, can you respond quickly as well?

Adam Stachura: We do not have enough good public toilets across Scotland. People tell us about that a lot. Covid caused many of them to close, but some councils, such as City of Edinburgh Council, started reopening them, even on a temporary basis, which was welcome.

Often when it comes to budgets at council level, public toilets are first on the chopping block. It might be just a negotiating position, but they are the first thing that are up for grabs to save money. However, good things cost money. There is an economic benefit to public toilets. They make it so that people can leave their homes, and they want to leave their homes.

I have not yet mentioned the massive impact of loneliness and social isolation in Scotland. There is at least one older person in every street in Scotland who is lonely all or most of the time. Two in every street in Scotland go at least half a week without seeing or hearing from anyone, and 50 per cent of over-50s got lonelier because of the pandemic. These types of policies are like loneliness impact tests, or tests of how we can get people to have the confidence to go out. People live with many health conditions, and it can be hugely embarrassing if they do not have access to public toilets. We have seen them close in train stations, and other places have bigger fees to access them. Having public toilets available is a core thing that we should be able to do in the 21st century in Scotland.

On your point about the voice of older people in local authorities, at Age Scotland we have been campaigning with the Scottish Older People's Assembly to have councillors as older people's champions. Over the past year, before the elections, we got up to about 22 local authorities with an older people's champion on the council. We are now looking at that being reaffirmed and for those councils that did not have one before to have such a position for a councillor. They will be the person in the room who will raise these issues and who can work with charities such as ours and with any other stakeholders to get those voices heard, as they will be embedded in local communities.

We would really welcome the support of committee members on that. If members have local authorities in their patch that do not have older people's champions, they could push for it; I

would be happy to speak to folks about that. It is really important to make sure that those voices, which are sometimes seldom heard or listened to, are acted upon.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Thanks very much. That is very interesting.

The Convener: Finally, because the inquiry is about town centres and retailers, I want to get a sense of whether the witnesses think that town centres should be a priority for investment. How important is that to your members? Adam, you have mentioned loneliness and isolation. Should we see town centres not just as economic drivers but as being important to people's quality of life? Is that more important to the people who you represent than to other groups?

Adam Stachura: They are absolutely core to society in some ways, whether they are full of shops or full of different types of spaces. Loneliness has impacted people of all ages over the past two years. More younger people have found that they are experiencing it, despite being the most digitally connected generation. Personal contact is important, and town centres are hugely important for that as a mixed type of space. They are not just for spending money, but for meeting people.

The rapid removal of bank branches from our town centres across the country—which, I am sure, all your constituencies have felt and will, sadly, continue to feel if things keep going the way they are going—has meant that there is sometimes less impetus for people to be in town centres, as well as that less investment goes into them.

It is really important to invest in them—they are core anchors of our communities. If we are going to make things such as 20-minute neighbourhoods a reality, town centres have to be part of that. It is about making sure that there is the right mix of services and having Government policy that helps direct the types of things that need to be there. Those things will cost money, but it will be the right thing to do.

Those types of things will require intervention and focus. Of course, there are so many priorities just now, as we are dealing with Covid, but this one is not just about today or tomorrow. It is about decades to come, and how our society changes, and all the things that we as human beings need for our health and wellbeing. It definitely needs to be supported.

The Convener: Thank you to all our witnesses this morning for the contribution that you have made to the inquiry.

12:04

Meeting continued in private until 12:17.

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