SCOTLAND'S TOWNS PARTNERSHIP

Towns and the 2026 Scottish Parliamentary election

Introduction

Towns and town centres are the places and communities where lives are lived. Towns are the most economically, socially and environmentally sustainable locations we have. As places to live, work and enjoy, towns can be the heart of communities and their well-being. Networks of towns and communities offer a range of opportunities when effectively connected and managed.

For long periods of the recent past, towns have been taken for granted and sometimes ignored. Their decline has been slow, but considerable, as we have decentralised and disaggregated our ways of living. Since 2013, Scotland has led the way in taking policy measures and other steps to improve towns and reverse their erosion. There has been cross-party support for this. As a result, we have strong policy and infrastructure on which to build the tools for continued concerted, consistent and impactful action.

The 2026 Scottish Parliamentary election is an opportunity for all parties to reinforce their commitment to great places throughout Scotland.

Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP) is the national organisation championing Scotland's town centres, working with many organisations to help breathe new life into local communities and secure their stronger, more sustainable future.

STP is the voice for Scotland's towns. We are the parent organisation of Scotland's Improvement Districts and spearhead the Scotland Loves Local campaign to boost local economies and improve places by galvanising support for the people and businesses in them. We also lever critical support for communities through our Understanding Scottish Places and Towns Toolkit projects.

The Scottish Parliamentary elections are a crucial opportunity to highlight the importance of, and provide support for, Scotland's towns and town centres. In this election we are asking all political parties and candidates to make commitments to further protect and enhance Scotland's town centres. By championing practices that will empower local communities, we will expand opportunities, drive local spending, tackle the housing emergency, help eradicate child poverty and further improve in sustainability while supporting local businesses, people and places.

Kimberley Guthrie
Chief Officer
Scotland's Towns Partnership

Professor Leigh Sparks
Chair
Scotland's Towns Partnership

“TOGETHER WE CAN ENSURE SCOTLAND’S TOWN CENTRES ARE FIT FOR THE FUTURE.”

Place First: A National Commitment to Towns

Towns are not just physical places, they are vital ecosystems that underpin our social fabric, economic vitality and sustainable development.

Scotland's town centres are catalysts for economic revival, vital in reducing poverty through job creation and accessible services and foundational to building sustainable, resilient communities. Continued focus on footfall recovery, town centre living, brownfield redevelopment, and embedding community wealth building will be key to maximising their long-term impact.

WE ARE ASKING THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT TO MAKE A NATIONAL COMMITMENT TO TOWNS, BY:

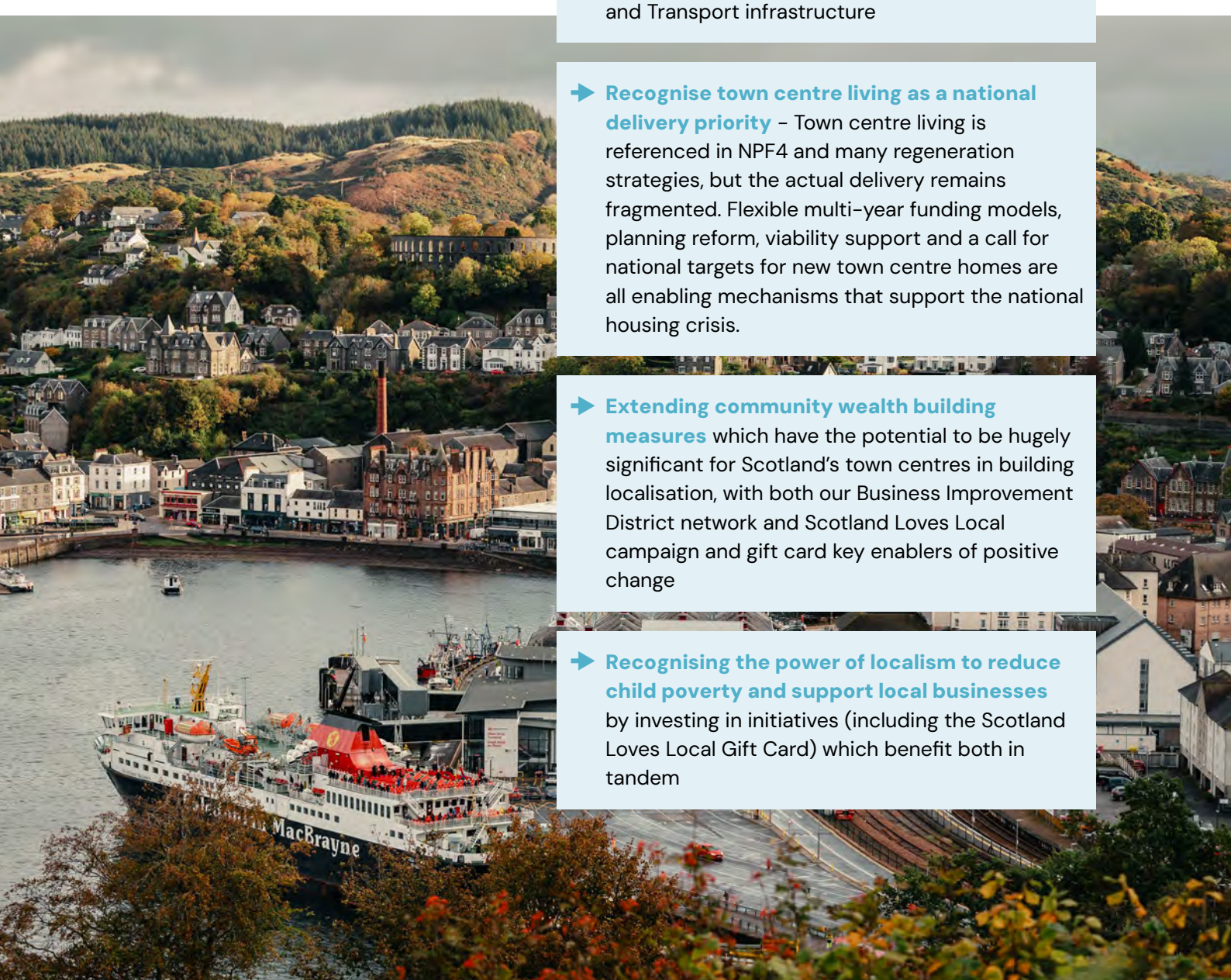
- **Strengthening Further the Town Centre approach** - recognising towns as central to delivering Scotland's economic, social and environmental goals - building stronger local economies, creating better places and helping to address the housing emergency by fully realising the potential of our buildings and assets

- **Further embedding towns in national strategy**, ensuring they are prioritised in the National Planning Framework, Community Wealth Building, Just Transition and Net Zero delivery, National Strategy for Economic Transformation and Digital and Transport infrastructure

- **Recognise town centre living as a national delivery priority** - Town centre living is referenced in NPF4 and many regeneration strategies, but the actual delivery remains fragmented. Flexible multi-year funding models, planning reform, viability support and a call for national targets for new town centre homes are all enabling mechanisms that support the national housing crisis.

- **Extending community wealth building measures** which have the potential to be hugely significant for Scotland's town centres in building localisation, with both our Business Improvement District network and Scotland Loves Local campaign and gift card key enablers of positive change

- **Recognising the power of localism to reduce child poverty and support local businesses** by investing in initiatives (including the Scotland Loves Local Gift Card) which benefit both in tandem



Scotland Loves Local

Scotland Loves Local is a national campaign led by Scotland's Towns Partnership, encouraging people to think local first and support the businesses, services and communities around them.

It is focussed on building stronger, more sustainable places by encouraging people to think local first. By choosing local and driving spend locally, it helps to support local jobs, create more local resilience and help towns to thrive - creating a local circular economy.

WE ARE CALLING ON THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT TO:

- **Invest further in the programme** to drive Scotland Loves Local over the term of the next Scottish Parliament. Supporting all aspects of community wealth building
- **Relaunch the Scotland Loves Local Fund** to prioritise local town centre development, aligning this with other capital funds
- **Embed the Scotland Loves Local Gift Card into a national support framework** as the mechanism for delivery of support funding, including child and food poverty benefits, thus enhancing local places and the people who work and live there

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)

Improvement Districts drive local economic development, enhance public spaces and foster community and local engagement and responsibility. They are designated areas where local businesses collaborate to fund and manage projects aimed at improving their local, economic and social environment.

Effective local authority advocacy and support are essential to the success and sustainability of improvement districts. Too often the local authority is lukewarm or hands-off. Several councils are experiencing significant levy collection issues that hinder the operational efficiency of BIDs.

SCOTLAND'S IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS

WE CALL ON THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT TO ENSURE THAT BIDS ARE FUNCTIONING EFFECTIVELY, BY:

- **Reviewing the Business Improvement Districts (Scotland) Regulations** to ensure they remain appropriate and extend to requiring positive local authority engagement, recognising the key place-making role that BIDs play
- **Develop best practice** on levy collection and standardise this throughout all local authorities

Simplifying Regulations for Town Centres

Development in town centres is often more difficult, expensive and time consuming than alternative sites. Some of this is the nature of the opportunity or the pre-existing buildings and capabilities.

Too often, though, we make life more difficult for those seeking to redevelop existing buildings and spaces. A good start is being made to looking at regulations at the national level in terms of consents uses and permitted rights. This work needs to be completed at pace and extend to all national policies on development and to the ways in which local authorities operate (e.g. planning, building control, thresholds for charges, local town centre housing regulations).

WE WOULD LIKE THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT TO:

- Speed up the reconsideration of policies and regulations developing in town centres
- Work with COSLA to identify and remove local authority barriers to development
- Re-energise attempts to reconsider fiscal imbalances in costs and taxation amongst development locations, particularly in connection with the enhancement of community wealth building and the need to address the climate emergency. This requires a full review of the role and function of Non-Domestic Rates, approach to, and levels of, VAT rates and corporate taxation.

Conclusion

We would welcome the opportunity to talk to you about how we believe a new Scottish Government can continue to place Scotland's towns, the heart of Scotland's communities, at the centre of placemaking policy and decision-making.

PROF LEIGH SPARKS

Leigh is Scotland's foremost retail academic and an internationally-recognised authority on towns. A Professor in Retail Studies and former Deputy Principal of the University of Stirling, he has been chair of Scotland's Towns Partnership since 2014. He was a member of the External Advisory Group on the Scottish Government's National Town Centre Review (2012-2013). Leigh chaired the review of the Town Centre Action Plan for the Scottish Government, the report from which (A New Future for Scotland's Towns) was published in February 2021. He was a member of the Scottish Government's Ministerial Retail Strategy Group, which wrote the Retail Strategy for Scotland, published in March 2022. He is a Churchill Fellow, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, runs a blog on retail matters (stirlingretail.com) and is Board Chair of Made in Stirling CIC.

KIMBERLEY GUTHRIE

Kimberley is one of the most recognisable figures in Scottish place-making. Her role with Scotland's Towns Partnership is to drive transformative change for our towns through collaboration and partnership with all stakeholders across all sectors. She brings more than 25 years' experience in senior management roles across the retail and business sector to the fore and is widely known in the public, business and community sectors. Having run her own successful children's boutique for 17 years, she directly understands the challenges that those who live, work and visit town centres face. Outside of her work with STP, Kimberley is also an independent business consultant, advising SMEs across the UK on marketing, consumer strategy, retailing and business transformation. She is also a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Prior to becoming Chief Officer, Kimberley carried out a wide-range of work for STP, including leading the organisation's work on Scotland Loves Local.

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Scotland Loves Local

SCOTLAND'S IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS

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