



National Planning Framework 4 Early Engagement – Policies

PROMOTING TOWN CENTRES

Scottish Planning Policy (2014):

Planning policy for town centres should be flexible and proactive, enabling a wide range of uses which bring people into town centres. The planning system should:

- apply a town centre first policy when planning for uses which attract significant numbers of people, including retail and commercial leisure, offices, community and cultural facilities;
- encourage a mix of uses in town centres to support their vibrancy, vitality and viability throughout the day and into the evening;
- ensure development plans, decision-making and monitoring support successful town centres; and
- consider opportunities for promoting residential use within town centres where this fits with local need and demand.

Development Plans should identify as town centres those centres which display:

- a diverse mix of uses, including shopping;
- a high level of accessibility;
- qualities of character and identity which create a sense of place and further the well-being of communities;
- wider economic and social activity during the day and in the evening; and
- integration with residential areas.

Plans should identify commercial centres as centres that have a more specific focus on retail/leisure.

*Local authorities should conduct regular town centre health checks (min. every 2 years)
Plans should aim to avoid clustering non-retail uses in town centres.*

Plans should adopt a sequential town centre first approach and planning authorities should be flexible and realistic in applying the method.

Decisions should have regard to the existing network of centres/sequential approach.

The impact of new development on the character and amenity of town centres, local centres and high streets will be a material consideration in decision making.

Development over 2,500 m² should provide a town centre impact assessment or retail impact analysis. Smaller retail and leisure proposals may provide a retail impact analysis if the authority deems it necessary.

Proposals outwith town centres must demonstrate that alternative options have been considered. Development should only be considered when if central options are unsuitable/unavailable, scale of development is appropriate and will not impact of the viability of existing town centres.

What has changed since 2014?

- Changing consumer behaviour, rapid growth in online shopping (online spend contributing to approx. 20% of total retailing, according to ONS).
- Towns diversifying and adapting to provide a different offer and function, such as community hubs, gathering places, for leisure and services. More community led projects. Increase in towns creating low carbon zones and introducing greening initiatives.
- Research undertaken by Ironside Farrar on the adoption of Scottish planning policy in local development plans¹ notes that all Local Development Plans promote a town centre first policy, but the requirements for retail impact assessments, town centre health checks and avoidance of clustering non-retail uses in town centres are less consistently applied. Five LDP policies were identified that varied from SPP to meet local circumstances. Promoting Town Centres was the second most selected answers for policies that work well for plan making purposes, noted as giving a clear and detailed statement of Scottish Government's expectations. Promoting Town Centres was the most selected answers for policies that work well for Development Management purposes, with the sequential approach identified as a particularly useful tool. It was considered that the policy could go further to promote mixed use development which would allow the role of town centres to adapt to the modern retail environment. Geographical differences require the policy to clearly distinguish how it should be applied in urban and rural areas.
- Scotland's Towns Partnership's town centre toolkit² focuses on three themes (attractive, active and accessible) and includes a method for auditing towns. Understanding Scottish Places³ provides a better understanding and comparison of places.
- The Digital Towns programme ran during 2017 and was funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by Scotland's Towns Partnership. The aim of the programme was to encourage Towns to think more creatively, about smarter concepts, including using digital to manage parking, smart lighting and waste collection, and using the infrastructure in towns to deliver education, digital heritage and tourism and entrepreneurship hubs. Digital and Smart technology – may have spatial planning implications/ opportunities.
- The introduction of Masterplan Consent Areas may also provide new opportunities for town centres, drawing on the lessons learned from the Renfrew Simplified Planning Zone, permitting certain changes of use within the town centre, to attract investment.
- Following the Town Centre First Principle the Place Principle has been introduced recognising that place is at the heart of addressing the needs and realising the full potential of communities.

Proposed key objective of NPF4: To ensure that planning policies recognise and address the challenges facing town centres so that they are better able to adapt and be vibrant, creative, enterprising and accessible places to live, work and visit.

¹ [Adoption of Scottish planning policy in local development plans](#)

² [Town Centre Toolkit](#)

³ [Understanding Scottish Places](#)

Issues to consider:

- What are the challenges facing town centres in the short and long term and are existing policies sufficient to support likely change and adaptation?
- Cultural and social activities are recognised as an important indicator when considering town centre vibrancy. Is existing policy and work on the Agent of Change sufficient in supporting the contribution that these activities make to the evening / night-time economy, and changing roles for town centres?
- What issues are shared across all town centres and therefore suitable for inclusion in a national policy, and what matters are more likely to require locally driven policies and approaches?
- Is guidance needed to assist planning authorities with the identification of local networks, centres and their boundaries and town centre health checks?
- Can more be done to ensure that town centres are accessible, connected and safe places for all?
- The interaction between the town centre first approach and the wider place principle and any implications that might have for policy?
- The role of towns in helping address the climate emergency/support ambitions for Scotland to become a net zero society by 2045?

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