

Corra Foundation's response to The Town Centre Expert Review Group call for evidence

How to revitalise town centres in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

About Corra Foundation

Corra Foundation exists to make a difference to the lives of people and communities. It works with others to encourage positive change, opportunity, fairness and growth of aspirations which improve quality of life. Corra wants to see a society in which people create positive change and enjoy fulfilling lives.

In 2020 Corra launched a ten-year strategy. It is long term because making a difference on the big challenges will take time. At its heart is the strong belief that when people find their voice, they unlock the power to make change happen.

Challenges and Opportunities

Ongoing divestment in physical retail space has adversely affected town centres – and is only sped by the shift to online shopping, and the downturn in the population's ability to spend caused by coronavirus.

Many units now lie empty and some have done for a considerable period.

One of the key issues for communities we support is a lack of accessible, cheap space in which to meet, interact, hold activities. The best kind of space for community activities is agenda free and which allows people to decide on which activities best suit them and how to develop that activity. High rents and rates make the empty unit in town centres inaccessible for local enterprise retail use and provide impossible barriers for community uses.

In Galashiels a local community social enterprise looking for a site for a waste food café – a café that diverted excess food from large retailers and provided low or no cost (on a pay-as-you-feel basis) balanced, healthy meals, was looking for a town centre site so that it could best serve the community who needed it most. They were quoted only market rents and rates, and despite raising well over £10,000 in a local crowd-funder, could not find a site that would be affordable, even in the short run.

The same group was then approached to design a shop front filler to decorate one of the empty units to improve the look of the town centre. They politely declined.

Eventually the café moved into a local community centre on a part-time basis, and with the onset of coronavirus have been cooking and delivering free meals to those shielding or unable to access fresh food due to economic reasons.

The reduction in retail units mean there is less footfall in town centre areas – a vicious circle which leads to a further reduction in viable retail businesses and to even lower footfall.

Those businesses which can, relocate to out-of-town shopping centres, taking residents further from the town centre and reducing investment and the attractiveness of the town centre as a destination. This also increases the numbers of cars on the roads, leading to out-of-town congestion, and reduced air quality.

Perhaps just as importantly, experiences from communities we work with show this also disadvantages those existing on less resource. Out-of-town shopping is not accessible to people without their own transport, or on limited budgets. In this way people who were already struggling see their local, accessible choices further reduced.

However, many town centres in Scotland are in easy walking distances of the homes that surround them. The number of empty units means that there is plenty of space for fresh new community led approaches to be developed here. **There is a real chance to build thriving town centres built on not just retail, but chances for social interaction, creativity and enterprise of many kinds.**

An example of this is an organisation Corra Foundation provided funding to through the Third Sector Resilience and Wellbeing Funds:

Swaddle was launched three and a half years ago by a local mum looking to offer support to women and children during the early years of childhood. The charity, which was self-sustaining, has rehomed nearly half a tonne of baby and children's clothing each month. This has been done via a dedicated shop working alongside Hamilton District Foodbank, Scotland's Baby Bank, Money Matters Advice Line and the NHS Local Health and Social Care Partnership. Swaddle also offers 20 parent support activities each month to over 160 families. 55% of the applications to Corra for the Third Sector Resilience Fund were unsuccessful as others were deemed in greater financial need. Many of these groups were just above the reserves threshold (12 weeks).

As a result of coronavirus Swaddle had to close the shop. A grant of £19,000 was made through the Third Sector Resilience Fund to help sustain the charity with money to cover essential overheads. Swaddle recognised that many families were struggling even more due to the impact of the pandemic. A grant of £5,000 was made from the Wellbeing Fund to provide a voucher scheme and deliveries to families who needed baby and children supplies.

Another of the communities Corra Foundation works with in Carbrain are looking at taking on a unit in the town centre shopping centre – this has paused due to coronavirus but is at an advanced stage of discussion.

This is also why Corra Foundation are developing the Participatory City Foundation model (www.weareeveryone.org) through Participatory Scotland. This model focusses on

supporting communities to develop activities that are meaningful for them, developed by and for the communities they are in. Much of the activity focusses around 'neighbourhood shops' which are flexible spaces in town centres that form a hub for activity and interaction. Accessibility in all its forms is a key consideration and the physical space develops depending on the needs of the community at any given time. Support is provided by designers who work with individuals and groups to design activity, test it and reiterate ideas.

Communities are full of inventive solutions to the issues they face, both collectively and in small groups, but **a lack of good, accessible and affordable space** means often these ideas die before they can get going.

A commitment to **prioritising space for communities** on reasonable rates, or peppercorn rents – with good clear communication of how this process works would go a long way to addressing this. Although community use does not provide the same market income for local authorities and landlords, it does provide a more vibrant town centre, increases wellbeing in communities, builds a sense of agency and increases footfall, meaning those businesses that are still viable begin to see town centres as attractive propositions to have stores. There is evidence in this from PCF's work in Barking and Dagenham, and Carnegie's '[Turnaround Towns UK](#)' report from late 2019 also provided evidence that having community anchor 'hubs' and creating social infrastructure to create change are vital for the reimagining of flourishing towns.

Considering mixed use developments (but designed by communities rather than developers), where retail and leisure businesses exist alongside good quality housing, community activity (during both the day and night time economies) and as we move forward in the 'new normal' co-working and shared enterprise spaces.

Prioritising wellbeing and low carbon in town centres will not only improve towns overall, and the quality of life experienced by their residents, but the knock-on effect is that economic activity will enliven again in towns. Local businesses and enterprises are more likely to thrive and there is likely to be less of a 'leaky bucket' economy (where money flows straight out of a community).

Examples like Groningen in the Netherlands show the kinds of things that can be done when we think differently about what town centre space is for -

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/dutch-mall-groningen-netherlands-forum-urban-hub> .

Support for local fayres and festivals, which provide both a way to encourage people into the town centre, but also provide a sense of pride and belonging for communities are important. *One of the communities Corra Foundation has worked alongside in its Place work, Cumnock, showed this with 4 Christmas festivals organised by the local community. The first three were organised by Cumnock Action Plan steering group and the most recent one organised by a local community organisation - Yipworld. These festivals brought people*

together and also provided a celebratory atmosphere through which to gather further ideas for the future of Cumnock.

Existing barriers and their removal

As previously stated, **high rents and rates** prevent any experimenting or testing of ideas in town centres by communities. A patchwork approach to and understanding of meanwhile use further exacerbates this.

A focus and **prioritisation of market value use** often means that units remain empty even when there are viable businesses or community uses to which these sites could be put. Unfortunately, with the retail sector in even further crisis than pre 2020, the likelihood of large corporations deciding to open stores in our towns has further reduced. Business as usual simply will not work.

Anecdotal evidence from conversations had with local authorities and local communities Corra Foundation works with suggests a further complicating factor is that some retail units are privately owned and falling into disrepair due to forming part of investment portfolios. For these, keeping a unit off the market and unoccupied is more attractive than selling – if selling would expose a unit to a reduced market price and therefore reduce the value of the portfolio. Existing Community Right to Buy legislation seems hampered by inability to establish ownership of High Streets and market value. A full review of the ownership, usage and value, both in market terms and of the space to local economies, alongside a concerted effort to ensure space is well used - would serve Scotland well in terms of bringing town centres back to life.

Many towns have excellent BIDs and community-led efforts to improve things (The Stove Network in Dumfries) but some towns have lost their BIDs in recent years (such as Kircaldy and Dunfermline) leading to a lack of representation.

Additionally, in order to succeed these groups need to be able to fight for what they believe would be best for the town and the community it serves. Communities who lack the skilled, driven and well-resourced individuals and groups ready to take on these challenges are less likely to be able to thrive.

TCAP and current delivery on ambitions

In terms of how the TCAP has met its stated ambitions, the experience we have from the communities we work alongside suggests there is still some way to go.

The below actions within the TCAP, which would support community enterprise and activity are those that most affect the communities, organisations and individuals we work with:

- We will take appropriate measures to create incentives to bring long term vacant premises back into use, (including the expansion of Fresh Start rates relief to apply to pubs, hotels and restaurants from 1 April 2014.)
- We will support community-led activity that supports our town centres by strengthening communities to implement initiatives that benefit town centre regeneration.
- We will continue to encourage local authorities and other stakeholders to use compulsory purchase powers to promote sustainable economic growth.
- We will develop a fund open to local authorities and community and third sector organisations to help deliver community design charrettes focussed on town centres.

There is either little evidence that we have seen in the places we work, or a limited understanding/ communication of the support that is available to communities. This is unfortunate as our experience suggests that communities and the individuals in them would have ideas and energy to support and develop town centres.

Providing money to wrap or decorate empty units is not the same as supporting activity in these units which would encourage footfall and interaction with our town centres. While many of the places we know of and work with have done great work in tidying up and improving the public realm, there would be far more mileage in allowing them to actively support community responses to the empty spaces, by animating them with creative, social, and welfare activities designed for the community by the community.

In Dunterlie, in East Renfrewshire the local community centre only opened on limited hours, due to a lack of demand. Corra Foundation worked with the aspirations of the community and discovered that conversely, the limited opening hours had led to people believing the centre was either never open, or not open for community uses. Corra Foundation and Barrhead Housing Association worked with the community and the centre, providing funding to allow the centre to remain open for longer than the existing provision. This in turn led to many new groups and activities happening, such as a Mother and Toddlers groups, food bank provision and support for a local community growing initiative.

TCAP objectives and policy areas

The stated policy shifts and objectives from the TCAP seem reasonable and well thought through, but the issue is that implementation appears patchy and slow – at least for those communities and organisations that we support.

If coronavirus has taught us anything as a society, it is the speed at which we can work when we must. Improving the places we live, work and enjoy should now be seen as a priority as we collectively deal with both the on-going effect of both the health crisis and the economic shock. Communities need and deserve thriving local places that put them at the heart of decision-making and place-making.

We know that many third sector organisations have increased collaborations and that many communities have taken more leading roles. We also know from the 946 groups that have so far reported back on their Third Sector Resilience Fund grant to Corra, 97% are still operational. There is a real sense of organisations needing to re-think where and how they deliver. Town centres offer opportunities for this.

Bold thinking needs to be backed up with clear and actionable steps that will, ensure that our communities develop not only resilience in the face of shocks, but also as places to thrive. These actions need to be whole system, and not rely on one level of society to deliver. As we move forward, we need to do so by developing constructive partnerships between the public, private, third and community sectors. Plans should be made as a society and aim not just to bring communities and the individuals living in them along, but to involve them as active participants in the journey of change.

A huge level of social action that has occurred because of the pandemic. The Social Action Inquiry is one of the pieces of work that is looking at how this can be sustained and how the environment in Scotland can become more enabling of social action. Space and place-making will be a major factor in this, as we have seen from evidence of community groups using schools to prepare food for those shielding or caught in difficult economic situations.

Additional focus areas for TCAP moving forward

- Promoting the **wellbeing of communities through town centre place-making**. Ensuring that where public service provision is moved to town centre locations and services are co-located, that this is not the only civic space available for activity. Neutral space that people develop a sense of community ownership is important. While co-location of services may be effective for ensuring shorter lines of communication and more joined-up provision, they may not always be spaces where people want to be to take part in community activity.
- Ensuring **communities are active collaborative partners** in developing solutions for the future. This needs to be in-depth and meaningful to have any chance of being productive. It may take new ways of thinking and working together to be developed. Multiple entry points and ways of participating should be available to allow for broad involvement. Relationship building is key, as is actively finding and listening well to seldom heard groups.

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