



# THE FUTURE OF SCOTLAND'S HIGH STREETS

A BEFS Response to a UK Parliament Scottish Affairs Committee Inquiry

## About This Paper

On 11 November 2025, the UK Parliament's Scottish Affairs Committee [launched an inquiry](#) into the future of Scotland's high streets. The purpose of [the inquiry](#) is to explore the challenges high streets and town centres in Scotland are dealing with at present, particularly with regard to the provision of shops, services and amenities, and how they can be supported to better meet community needs in future.

The inquiry features [a call for evidence](#). This paper presents a response to six of the key questions set by the Committee from Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS). BEFS is grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry.

BEFS is an umbrella body for organisations working in the built environment in Scotland. Drawing on extensive expertise in a membership-led forum, BEFS informs, debates and advocates on the strategic issues, opportunities and challenges facing Scotland's historic and contemporary built environment. Further information about BEFS is available [on the BEFS website](#).

Other relevant consultation responses from BEFS can be seen below, as many issues overlap and demand associative consideration:

- [Community Wealth Building \(Scotland\) Bill](#) (May 2025)
- [The Fourth National Planning Framework - Two Years On](#) (March 2025)
- [Protecting Built Heritage](#) (Feb 2025)
- [Guidance for Inclusive Design for Town Centres and Busy Streets](#) (March 2024)
- [New Realities of Retail and E-commerce in Scotland](#) (March 2022)
- [Town Centre Action Plan Review](#) (August 2020)

## BEFS Response to Call for Evidence

How are Scotland's high streets changing? What factors are driving this change, and what does the long-term future of Scotland's high streets and town centres look like?

BEFS has been consulting with its Members and stakeholders towards the production of a [2026 Manifesto: Building Foundations for a Better Scotland](#). The Manifesto, published in late October 2025, is designed to inform elections to the Scottish Parliament in May 2026.

The key concerns about trends in town centres and high streets raised in this consultation activity are: a rise in vacant buildings; building maintenance and repair challenges; and a generally reduced provision of economic opportunities and services.

BEFS Members, including professional bodies, national charities, funding agencies, community groups, heritage trusts and public bodies, have pointed to community consultation processes across Scotland that often feature at or near the top of wish-lists a desire to bring empty high street buildings back into use, and to improve the local town centre appearance and its activity offer.

BEFS Members recognise the causes of rising vacancy rates identified by the Committee, which include changes in consumer behaviour, with growth in online shopping and visits to shopping centres and large supermarkets reducing demand for small local businesses. In addition, a rise in working from home, accelerated by changing staffing practices during the Covid pandemic, is perceived as having left a legacy of reduced footfall in town centres, and central workspace premises becoming vacant or with much-reduced usage.

The [Places of Worship Forum in Scotland](#), a cross-sector strategic group facilitated by BEFS, has also pointed to rising vacancy levels for churches and other religious buildings in high streets and town centres. They describe the situation, which is set to intensify in the coming decade as some religious bodies plan to sell more of their properties, as a state of emergency. In addition, public sector audits and asset rationalisation programmes are leading to closures of governmental premises in a challenging public finances context.

BEFS Members have expressed concerns about these trends on multiple fronts. Longer-term vacancies create a direct problem in putting town centre buildings at risk of further deterioration and eventual demolition. If unchecked, this leads many buildings of historical significance, from town halls and churches to libraries and industrial heritage, inaccessible and in a state of neglect.

These trends create a knock-on effect. Boarded-up buildings dissuade people from visiting a town centre or from seriously considering it as a place to live, work and/or start a new business. The physical deterioration associated with long-term vacancy increases over time, driving up the repair and refurbishment investments needed to bring these buildings back into use, with negative implications for the viability of reuse projects.

There is a great loss of potential as well. Many of these buildings could provide economic life and activity to the town centre, in the form of heritage tourism, social gatherings, public service access, new enterprises, and much more. They could provide homes in the middle of a housing emergency. There are massive climate change benefits in reuse, given the embodied carbon these buildings contain, and the close proximity to population centres that support active travel and sustainable economic development. Reuse has wider societal benefits for health and wellbeing, improved pride of place, building social capital, and reducing social isolation.

BEFS Members are aware that policy-makers have recognised town centre decline as a problem. They have expressed enthusiasm for policy and practice actions aimed at diversifying town centre building usage and activity. There is a shared cross-sector recognition that retail and office high street use patterns are not likely to return to

previous levels, and that a solution lies in providing a wider range of activities and uses to increase the value to current and potential residents, and the offer to visitors.

These include town centre living, explicitly highlighted in the Scottish Government's [Fourth National Performance Framework](#) and the [2022 Town Centre Action Plan Review](#), and supported by the work of the [Scottish Empty Homes Partnership](#) and [Existing Homes Alliance](#). There is agreement that converting vacant high street buildings into homes will be helpful in generating increased population density and a renewed purpose for high streets and town centres.

Other recent and emerging policy developments, including Community Wealth Building, 20 minute neighbourhoods, living well locally, community asset ownership, Local Place Plans, Townscape Heritage Initiatives, community led tourism, town boards, the Pride in Place programme, and public/voluntary coproduction hubs, also align well with aspirations to diversify town centres.

These actions can help to improve the urban fabric of some high streets and restore activity, including through provision of new heritage trails, museums, events and performance venues, community hubs, flexible business, hospitality and social enterprise spaces, and other types of services and amenities. BEFS Members have pointed to the wide diversity of uses, from climbing centres and sports halls to artists' studios and cinemas, that a prominent vacant town centre building can be transformed into, demonstrating new vitality to surpass dependency on retail trade and office space.

There are, however, concerns about the scale and replication of these initiatives, and the level of resources required to implement them in villages, towns and city neighbourhoods across the country. BEFS Members feel case study regeneration examples, some of which are highlighted later in this paper, are not representative of wider experiences, in which communities are generally frustrated by lack of progress and action with regard to their high streets and town centres.

The Committee inquiry could add value to the policy appetite for town centre revitalisation by emphasising the need for higher levels of investment to support policy implementation and further diversification-focused interventions.

#### **What has previous research found about what people in Scotland want from their high streets and town centres, especially in the context of the rise of online services?**

Several BEFS Members, including the Royal Town Planning Institute Scotland, Scotland's Towns Partnership and SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum, contributed to the Town Centre Action Plan Independent Review Group's 2021 report, a [New Future for Scotland's Town Centres](#). The Review Group undertook thematic consultations, invited oral and written evidence, and delivered a public survey with more than 1500 responses.

Their research indicated a general sense of disappointment in the current offer of social, cultural and economic opportunities, concerns about how well town centre assets are being cared for, and strong support for diversifying town centres. BEFS Member consultation activity in the years since the report suggest these positions are still current, with continued desire to restore life and functions, and to enhance use and maintenance of town centre buildings, a typical aspiration for residents of many Scottish places.

The Review Group's recommendations - including increased application of reuse of vacant and derelict assets, community wealth building and town centre living - chime strongly

with those of the [2026 BEFS Manifesto: Building a Better Scotland](#). The Review Group also called for stronger implementation of the [Place Principle](#), which is being supported by Historic Environment Scotland with regard to the built environment sector. The Place Principle is a further recognition by the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that policy-makers and practitioners could be doing more by way of collaboration, investment and project delivery to provide the town centres people want.

Scotland's Towns Partnership manages the [Understanding Scottish Places](#) tool, which was developed on the back of the Town Centre Action Plan as a valuable platform that provides comparable data on Scottish towns. The [Place Standard Tool](#), developed by a partnership including Public Health Scotland to support consultation on places, is also a useful source of research on perceived strengths and weakness of town centres and high streets, and for identifying priority improvement areas and shared visions. The [Scottish Household Survey](#) is also a useful source of information of views on local neighbourhoods, services, demographics and building conditions.

**How do high streets and town centres in rural and remote parts of Scotland differ from those in urban areas, including their composition, the role they play in communities, and the pressures they are facing?**

Rural and island Scotland faces particular challenges with regard to place-based improvement activity. Fragile economies with a low supply of full time jobs, limited access to skilled contractors, a shortage of affordable housing and depopulation trends create additional barriers for efforts to improve the built environment in villages and small towns, including high street amenities.

Remote rural and island dynamics generally make interventions around infrastructure, services, and building repair and maintenance works more costly, time consuming and difficult.

These additional challenges must be taken into close consideration by policy-makers in planning for the future. As rural areas are rich with heritage assets, and serve as a major driver of Scotland's tourism industry, there are major economic opportunities available in the revitalisation of their town centres, and in developing the regional skills base and supply chains required to restore and maintain their built environment.

**How can communities and local authorities respond to vacant properties in their high streets and town centres? Are additional powers and/or resources needed to allow them to do so more effectively?**

There is a consensus in the BEFS Membership, that across the piece, more should be done to put the place-based policies we have into action, especially with regard to the productive reuse of vacant and derelict buildings.

Four opportunities for progress identified by BEFS Members, which all relate to the theme of matching good policy intentions with sufficient resources, are:

**Increased funding for heritage led regeneration projects:** Some national heritage-related funding programmes are seeing successful application rates drop below 20% in 2025, demonstrating an extreme discrepancy between demand and supply. Supporting a greater number of proposed cross-sector heritage led initiatives would deliver strong and mutually beneficial outcomes for improving town centres and high streets, the historic and existing built environment sector, and wider society.

A 2025 [funding data review by Historic Environment Scotland](#) (HES) demonstrated that for every £1 pound invested in the historic environment via grants and funding from HES, a further £5.24 has been leveraged back into Scotland's historic environment. [Local visitor levies](#) are a potential vital source of additional investment in reusing, protecting and enhancing the built and historic environment in town centres.

One of HES central functions is the distribution of around £12-13m per annum in grants to external bodies. This supports the care and repair of historic buildings and monuments, archaeological activity, and area-based regeneration and heritage improvement schemes. It also directly funds a number of national, regional and local initiatives.

HES is a successor organisation to Historic Scotland (HS), which was founded pre-devolution in 1991 as an executive agency of the Scottish Office. In 1994/95, the value of Historic Scotland's annual external grant programme was £11.3m. It has remained broadly stable over time, and was worth £12.4m in 2024/25.

If the HS/HES grant programme had kept pace with inflation since then, it should have grown to £23.4m by 2025/26. This £10m real terms budget decline, based on figures from annual HS/HES reports, is representative of an underinvestment in the sector that restricts its potential. In 2024/25, two thirds more was asked from HES than they could award, further indicating a resource shortfall in policy implementation.

**Address skills shortages:** We have a widely recognised problem finding workers with the traditional building skills needed to maintain Scotland's historic properties across cities, towns, villages, rural areas, and islands. Specialist contractors like stonemasons or thatchers are often booked up months in advance and unavailable in some parts of the country.

This makes it difficult for building owners to get the quotes or repairs they need, sometimes causing entire projects to fail. As these skilled experts become harder to find, town centre buildings will become at greater risk of dereliction and vacancy. The benefits they bring to communities, like supporting local economies, improving well-being, and helping meet climate goals, are also put at risk.

Traditional construction training is an essential service needed for the health of buildings and for preventative maintenance in high streets. Action to support Colleges and training centres to deliver these courses is vital. In addition, in a fast-changing sector driven by Net Zero goals and emerging technology, skilled workers need ongoing opportunities to learn and to share their knowledge with the next generation.

BEFS Members have pointed to skills gaps and capacity issues in other areas of the built environment sector, including retrofit coordinators, conservation engineers, planning officers and many specialisations in the wider construction industry. Ongoing training courses for staff aligned with a pipeline of new workers can help ensure that skilled traditional building workers and other built environment experts are made available in the right places at the right time to maintain and enhance town centres.

**Effective implementation of Community Wealth Building:** The built environment is a focal point of regeneration strategies enabling pride of place, sustainable economies, good quality of life, and adaptive buildings suited to new futures. There are further gains to be made in aligning the spheres of tourism and heritage through improved collaboration and holistic, cross-policy strategy. Well-maintained, active and accessible heritage buildings enhance a place's distinctive identity and tourist offer. This includes the creation of jobs

at visitor attractions, and other economic benefits to the many local high street businesses, including hospitality and retail, that benefit from tourism.

There is a clear line of influence between Community Wealth Building, heritage, tourism and economic resilience. The local procurement of maintenance contracts for historic buildings can reduce costs while upskilling contractors and supporting local economies. There are, however, significant barriers to progress with regard to vacant, derelict, vulnerable or under-utilised historic buildings, including access to funding for purchase, refurbishment and maintenance. There is a reality that many local and community-led organisations do not have the capacity or governance to effectively manage all of the capital and operational needs of a long-standing empty building that is often in pressing need of repair.

The Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill includes an obligation for local authorities and other public bodies to produce and implement Community Wealth Building action plans. Leading public sector stakeholders responsible for developing these action plans should work closely and collaboratively with prospective projects and partners in the sphere of heritage tourism and community ownership, to help ensure the highest chance of long-term success.

The ability of local authorities to lead, support and deliver Community Wealth Building action plans, requires an improved level of resourcing across multiple local authority departments that are currently stretched.

**Stable and secure voluntary sector funding:** Changes to the culture and heritage funding landscape with regard to both project and organisational funding are reducing opportunities, and making services and initiatives increasingly hard to sustain. Smaller charities, community groups and heritage trusts face increasing difficulties planning for the future amid uncertainty over public sector support and grant programmes, with implications for their staff and volunteer capacity and operating models.

Annual and other short-term funding arrangements with short notice periods of discontinuation or significant reductions create challenges for the sector with regards to instability, uncertainty, service decline and poor resilience. There are worsening challenges in securing funding to initiate new heritage projects, and to maintain existing ones, as well as across fundraising for capital works and revenue-based project elements.

Not only is there high demand for competitive funding applications in the public and voluntary sector, but other forms of resourcing activity, such as income generation, crowd-funding and philanthropy are difficult to make a success of in practice. This situation is exacerbated by inflation and rising repair, maintenance and insurance costs.

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations [Fair Funding in Scotland](#) campaign calls for funders to implement a set of standard principles, including longer-term support of three years or more, and flexible core funding. If implemented, these changes will help support improvements in capacity, project sustainability and the quality of outcomes for high streets and town centres.

**What examples of successful high street and town centre regeneration exist in Scotland and elsewhere, and what can be learned from these examples?**

BEFS Members SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum and Scotland's Towns Partnership regularly showcase examples of success and innovation in town centre regeneration

through their respective SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration and Scotland Loves Local Awards.

The resurgence of Paisley, Scotland's largest town, was [recognised as the Town of the Year winner](#) in the 2025 Scotland Loves Local Awards. The outcomes of investments of more than £100m in cultural assets over the past decade, including transformational refurbishments of Paisley Museum, Paisley Town Hall and Paisley Arts Centre, were recognised for their impact in effectively responding to major social and economic challenges to provide a vibrant and historic town centre complemented by new business activity, enhanced architecture and increased cultural opportunities.

The category winners of the [2025 SURF Awards for Community Regeneration](#) include conversion of a listed Midsteeple Quarter building in Dumfries town centre into apartments, and reuse of vacant and neglected spaces in Ardrossan South Beach for community, tourism and enterprise activity. Built environment reuse featured strongly across the 2025 shortlist, which also included transformation of a vacant C-listed church in Perth into a youth centre, a residential retrofit to Passivhaus standard in Dalkeith, and conversion of a disused former department store in Huntly into a cinema, visitor centre, performance space and cafe. Full profiles of all 15 shortlisted initiatives, with an emphasis on transferable learning outcomes, is available in a [2025 SURF Awards publication](#).

[The Ridge Foundations](#), a BEFS Member social enterprise based in the burgh town of Dunbar in East Lothian, has successfully regenerated derelict town centre buildings and gardens while simultaneously training young people in a range of practical skills, including joinery, construction labouring, preparation of traditional mortars, and rubble wall building. This community led initiative has not only benefited Dunbar town centre and provided valuable training and employment opportunities, but it has also contributed to building repair in other towns in the east of Scotland, by supporting trainees to undertake and deliver works elsewhere on contract. Its heritage skills training impact has been recognised by Historic Environment Scotland and in national awards.

BEFS Member Heritage Network has published a case study of [the Pyramid at Anderston](#), a former Church of Scotland complex that is now a community-owned multi-purpose hub in a high street in Anderston in west-central Glasgow. The Pyramid has successfully generated a number of income streams, and provides services for all ages and backgrounds. Just some of these include school sports, dance and yoga classes, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programmes, community meals, art classes and exhibitions, and roller disco. There is also a busy community market, a yurt cinema and winter film festival, Christmas events, conferences, weddings, other cultural events, and film and TV location hires.

The Pyramid hosted a 2025 conference by BEFS, entitled Places of Worship: Planning Forward. The event brought together planning authority decision makers and those actively involved in owning, managing or running places of worship, funding places of worship and giving heritage advice to discuss the future of these buildings in the context of rising vacancy rates, many of which are located in town centres and high streets. A [learning outcomes report](#) from the conference includes considerations around legal frameworks, practical challenges, adaptation for new use, and planning processes.

A final example, also in Glasgow, is Govan town centre, which is particularly notable for its approach to heritage led regeneration. Town centre initiatives, including those highlighted below, have drawn inspiration from a rich social, cultural and economic history

from the medieval era through to the shipbuilding age to productively reuse empty buildings and restore vibrancy and opportunity:

- [Govan Stones at Govan Old Parish Church](#) - An award-winning, community led museum collection of carved stone sculptures from early medieval Strathclyde Kingdom, housed in an A-listed church that also provides music performances, community events and archaeological digs in the heart of central Govan, with plans for redeveloping its basement into workspace.
- [Fairfield Heritage Centre](#) - A second community museum in Govan's high street, which refurbished a major section of the former Fairfield shipyard to document, celebrate and share Govan's leading international role in shipbuilding in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The building also provides events, learning and volunteering opportunities, a shop, venue hire, and office and meeting space for small businesses and social enterprises.
- [Govan Heritage: Remarkable Past, Remarkable Future](#) - BEFS Member National Lottery Heritage Fund has invested in the restoration of a derelict town centre site, Govan Graving Docks, which will bring a historic Pump House building back into use as a community hub, complemented by planned improvements to public spaces and additional heritage tourism activity.
- [Traditional Shopfront Improvement Programme](#) - From 2009 to 2022, local delivery vehicle Central Govan Action Plan provided shop owners in Govan town centre with funding and practical support to re-establish heritage features of their shopfronts through full-scale reinstatements, providing major improvements to local street quality to the benefit of residents, businesses and visitors as part of a local Townscape Heritage Initiative.
- [The Portal Arts Hub](#) - Created from a row of derelict high street shop units that had lain vacant for almost two decades, The Portal has been recognised nationally for its success in providing arts and media opportunities for all local age groups, from young children to senior citizens, across arts and crafts classes, gallery exhibitions, community workshops, radio and television production, and more.

Should the Committee wish to visit any of these places and projects to learn more about their background, development and transferable lessons, BEFS would be pleased to make introductions to local project managers and stakeholders.

#### **How can the UK and Scottish Governments work with communities and local authorities to maintain and enhance Scotland's high streets and town centres?**

On behalf of its diverse Members and stakeholders, who care for, celebrate and promote the value of Scotland's historic buildings, public spaces and infrastructure, the 2026 BEFS Manifesto calls on policy-makers to create the conditions for a well-resourced, dynamic and effective built and historic environment sector.

This will deliver strong value for public money as preventative spend, delivering substantial progress as part of a holistic approach across multiple public policy portfolios, from environmental sustainability, skills and economic development to housing, poverty and health.

Scotland has pressing challenges and varying economic disparities across high streets and town centres its urban and rural regions. The BEFS Manifesto features 15 practical policy recommendations to address these, including:

- Commit to investment in, and enabling pathways to, bring vacant and derelict land and buildings back into use at scale;
- Scale up built environment and heritage investment programmes, leveraging value across portfolios;
- Invest in a national programme for training delivery across a variety of traditional building and wider construction skills.

Full background and further detail on each policy recommendation is available in the full Manifesto, [available on the BEFS website](#).

Ultimately, the investments called for in the BEFS Manifesto will help build a better Scotland by reversing decline and improving quality of life across all of our places.

BEFS is confident that taking forward these policy recommendations will set the foundations for enhancing and maintaining Scotland's high streets and town centres in the longer term.

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*End of BEFS statement for the Scottish Affairs Committee.*

BEFS responses to a number of consultations in relation to the Built Environment can be found at: <https://www.befs.org.uk/resources/consultations/>

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BEFS gives consent to the Scottish Affairs to Committee to publish the consultation with name, to share the response internally with other UK Parliament representatives and with UK Government policy teams, and to contact BEFS in future in relation to this consultation exercise.