

BEFS EVIDENCE STATEMENT: REVITALISING HIGH STREETS

A UK Parliament Housing, Communities & Local Government Committee Call for Evidence

About This Paper

In summer 2026, the House of Commons Select Committee for Housing, Communities and Local Government launched an inquiry on revitalising high streets.

The focus of the inquiry is on high street regeneration in England, and views are sought on the clustering of similar retail and services such as betting shops and vape shops, the effectiveness of local government powers in supporting improvement, and the implementation of the Pride in Place Strategy.

This is a submission from Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) to two questions in the call for evidence. 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:

- Future of Scotland's High Streets (Dec 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 recognises much of the Committee's focus apply to England only, and we have looked to add value by providing comment relevant to two of the more general questions, based

on the knowledge and experience of our Scotland-based network on town centres and high streets in different parts of Scotland.

BEFS Response to Call for Evidence

What impact does the clustering of similar retail and service outlets, such as betting shops, vape shops and barbers, have on high streets and community pride?

BEFS Members, including professional bodies, national charities, funding agencies, community groups, heritage trusts and public bodies, regularly meet in Historic Environment Working Group sessions to address matters of strategic interest in Scotland.

One of the Working Group's current area of investigation is fire safety and heritage, for which a short life sub-group has been formed to examine fire prevention, post-fire restoration and buildings insurance, and issue policy and practice recommendations.

The establishment of a new sub-group was prompted by discussion following the 8 March 2026 fire in the B-listed Union Corner building next to Glasgow Central train station. The fire led to the partial collapse and demolition of the 1851 building, and severe disruption to transport services, local businesses and closure of some city centre streets.

It provoked comment and reaction from politicians, national media commentators and many voices in the existing built and historic environment sector around what lessons can be taken to avoid a repeat of this situation in other heritage buildings.

The fire was reported as beginning in a vape shop. Both the Historic Environment Working Group, and the Fire Safety and Heritage Short Life Sub-Group, have shared concerns that new technology and volatile substances appears to be leading to increased risks, and shared examples of a number of fires in buildings in Scottish towns and cities with causes attributed to a lithium ion battery.

There are concerns that the spread and proliferation of vape shops on historic high streets, practices of overnight charging of lithium batteries and power tools, 'pop up shop' style retail events featuring new technologies, and visitors bringing electrical bikes and scooters into high street buildings are increasing fire risks and compromising building safety.

Participants have pointed out that the prevalence of historic buildings in town centres and high streets, and their proximity to each other, creates added risks for building safety and heritage protection. As demonstrated in the Glasgow Union St example, a fire in a single small vape shop can quickly spread to upper floors and adjacent buildings.

Sub-group meetings will be taking place in September, October and November 2026 to explore these and other fire safety issues in Scotland's built environment further. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee may also wish to examine the threats to building safety that the growth of vape shops may be creating, and any blind spots in policy that could be highlighted and addressed.

A series of Scottish Government Ministerial Working Groups on Building and Fire Safety, which were established in 2017, are also exploring opportunities to handle new risks through strategic policy in Scotland. In addition, Historic Environment Scotland publish regularly updated guidance on fire safety, including Short Guide 14: Fire Safety Management in Traditional Buildings for Dutyholders.

What impacts can improvements to a high street have on community pride and people's sense of belonging?

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.

These case studies, often in places with social and economic problems, low investment and concerns about the future, demonstrate the value and impact of both strategic place-based interventions and smaller community led initiatives for the people who live in, work and visit town centres and high streets. The improvements provide increased economic opportunities, improved wellbeing, new places to socialise, in addition to volunteering, training and learning opportunities, all of which enhance use of high street buildings and improve local quality of life.

Paisley, Scotland's largest town, was the Town of the Year winner in the 2025 Scotland Loves Local Awards. The award recognised 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. The interventions effectively responded to major social and economic challenges, and help 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 19th and 20th 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.

The opportunities for further high street improvement through reuse of vacant and derelict assets, improved focus on repair, maintenance and retrofit, increased town centre living, and more holistic, cross-policy approaches to place-making are highlighted in the 2026 BEFS Manifesto: Building a Better Scotland. With strong parallels in town centre and high street dynamics between Scotland and many regions of England, BEFS hopes the Manifesto will be useful to the inquiry.

Place-based approaches are growing in influence in national policy, as evidenced by a series of policy initiatives including the Place Principle, Local Place Plans, 20 Minute Neighbourhoods and Local Living, Community Wealth Building, the Town Centre Action

Plan, community led regeneration, and the Place-Based Investment Framework. To maximise cross-policy value and impact, historic and existing built environment and heritage interests must be fully reflected in place-based policy and practice.

By way of tracking and demonstrating the wider impact of improvement activity, Scotland's Towns Partnership manages the Understanding Scottish Places tool, which was developed on the back of the Scottish Government's Town Centre Action Plan as a valuable platform that provides consistent and 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 community views on strengths and weakness of town centres and high streets.

BEFS Members regularly argue that further strategic action between place-making, town centre regeneration, health and wellbeing, climate adaptation and liveable neighbourhoods will not only deliver major progress across a number of UK Government and Scottish Government policy priorities but improve quality of life across the population.

End of BEFS statement for the Housing, Communities and Local Government 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/

RESPONDENT INFORMATION

Name: Derek Rankine, Head of Policy and Strategy

Email: derekr@befs.org.uk

Date: 2 September 2026

Responding on behalf of an Organisation - BEFS (Built Environment Forum Scotland)

Address and Postcode: 133 Lauriston Place, Edinburgh, EH3 9JN

Website: www.befs.org.uk

BEFS gives consent to the 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.