

TOWN CENTRE CONFERENCE

ON RESOURCES AVAILABLE FOR SMALL SCALE CONSERVATION AND REDEVELOPMENT

HELD WITHIN AYR TOWN HALL ON APRIL 10th 2019

This record began as a simple minute of the conference talks and discussions but as the day proceeded it became apparent that it was impossible to capture the full detail of all that was being said by our gifted and enthusiastic speakers. Nonetheless we have attempted to use the speakers' words to explain the roles of their organisations and how they can help to restructure and regenerate town centres. We feel an important message from the conference is one of publicising each of the organisations and their roles, stressing how they collaborate. We are giving contact details. Each organisation has a comprehensive website. It is worth emphasising that these organisations exist to guide communities and councils through what can appear to be complex pathways as we collectively seek to breathe new life into the centres of Scotland's towns and cities.

In welcoming those attending, **Esther Clark (Ayr Station Hotel Community Action Group chair)** spoke of her involvement in the attempt to retain the Station Hotel building and how she had come to know the organisations represented at the conference. The funding of the Station Hotel and the mechanism for executing that project that we hoped for were not the same as the Community Empowerment opportunities that we would be discussing today which might work for some smaller projects.

The purposes of the conference were several. The training on new legislation and new supports for regeneration was invaluable for councillors, council officials and workers in this field, as well as for community groups and individuals. The chance for the council and the community to engage with each other and the opportunity to network all round was important.

The support received from South Ayrshire Council in facilitating the conference was acknowledged and finally she thanked in advance all speakers and gave details of both of the day's chairmen for what she was confident would be a productive and interesting day.

The **MORNING SESSION** was chaired by **Kinlay Laidlaw of Laidlaw Associates Building Surveying Ltd of Crosshill, Maybole. He is an accredited building surveyor and used to be the National Trust lead surveyor for Ayrshire & Arran.** He spoke briefly to the considerable range of interesting buildings which graced the host town ranging from the remains of its early Cromwellian fortress to thatched properties and the use of carved stone in creations of several superstar architects.

1. The first speaker was **Phil Prentice, Chief Officer for Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP), based at The Melting Pot, 5 Rose Street, Edinburgh EH2 2PR. website www.scotlandstowns.org**

STP is a national body for Scotland's towns' centres and for all those who work to support them. It is a hub to help people learn, connect, find practical support and advice, and share good practice and knowledge. Its deeply rooted knowledge of townscapes and its range of services support the Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to secure a positive future for Scotland's towns.

Phil began by highlighting some of Ayr's varied assets which he believed could offer significant advantages as it moved towards restructuring its town centre. Key attributes were its riverside position at a point where that river meets an attractive coast line and offers harbour facilities, its many historic buildings and other historic links, its frequent rail links with Glasgow, its nearby airport, its people, its university, its diverse mix of jobs, its tourism potential, and its role as a seat of local government. He described Scotland as a nation of towns within which 70% of its population resided but, as with Ayr, these towns now needed restructuring.

The world financial crash of 2008 had been a game changer, since which much of the retail trade had moved on-line, populations had increasingly moved to the periphery of towns, and at times their centres had no one within them. It was in the face of such changes that the Scottish Government had in 2013 set up the Fraser Review which produced detailed recommendations for re-energising town centres. Taking these forward had led to a number of proposals which included a 'town centre first' principle whereby public bodies would consider i) how they could support town centres before considering development elsewhere and ii) the impact of proposals to relocate services out of town centres. There needed to be work with housing providers to bring empty town centre properties back into use as affordable housing and to broaden the appeal of town centres with a mix of leisure, recreation, and public facilities. The availability of broadband and public transport also needed to be factored in. Key to the success of some of this is the need to make it easier for the public sector to make decisions as economic forces move much more quickly than the planning process.

He went on to describe how Scotland's Improvement Districts, first introduced in 2006, seek to provide a vehicle for local businesses to work together with other public and private sector partners to improve local economies and, by extension, local communities. Essentially Improvement Districts see efforts and budgets combined collaboratively to build on existing assets in consensual and ambitious ways to create whole community projects. He cited successful examples from Lanark and Stornoway and suggested that Ayr could create one 'town team' to look to the future, though the past should never be forgotten. In response to a question, Phil accepted that the retail decline in Ayr had been fast but it was not unique to the town. The recovery of buildings and their re-use in an effort to shrink down the town centre in the style recently achieved in Stirling was something to be considered.

2. The second speaker was Malcolm Cowie, Policy Manager of the Scottish Government's Community Empowerment Team based at Area 3-F (North), The Scottish Government, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ website <https://www.gov.scot/publications/asset-transfer-under-community-empowerment-scotland-act-2015-guidance-relevant-9781786527493/>

The Community Empowerment (2015) Act was designed to empower communities in Scotland by making it easier for them through Asset Transfer to manage, lease or take over ownership of an asset (land and buildings) in public ownership. Once a request had been received authorities could not dispose of the asset until the process had been concluded. Malcolm described how it set out best practice for authorities as they responded to requests and had launched a comprehensive review of how well the associated democratic process was working.

The latter review had resulted in all relevant authorities being asked to report for the first time by 30 June 2018 with regard to Asset Transfer applications over the year ending 31 March 2018. This would continue to be requested on an annual basis. Conclusions to date were difficult to judge, the

quality of responses varied considerably, and not all authorities responded though 68 had. Of those, 40 were still in the process of responding, 25 had completed a response, and 3 had refused. Areas which had made most positive responses included Aberdeenshire (though not Aberdeen city), Highland, and Dumfries and Galloway. Least responses had been received from Health Boards (only 2) and Colleges (none). Assets successfully transferred included some related to forestry, car parking, and community spaces.

Researchers at Glasgow Caledonian University had been commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of how the Asset Transfer legislation was performing with a view to reporting by early 2020. Whilst it was meantime clear not enough were reporting, the way forward was by encouragement and promoting the concept. It was expected the second round would see more responses.

Malcolm pointed out that it was commonly believed that only surplus property was considered for asset transfer but this was incorrect. It was also unnecessary for applicants to use those forms or procedures devised by authorities but every effort was made to encourage collaboration.

3. The third speaker was Neil Langhorn, Head of the Scottish Government Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) Policy Unit based at Area 2-H (South), Planning and Architecture Unit, The Scottish Government, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ website www.beta.gov.scot/publications/compulsory-purchase-orders/

He described CPOs as powerful tools allowing projects to proceed where agreement to allow purchase was not possible, or where an owner was unknown or could not be contacted. Organisations (such as local authorities and Transport Scotland) and infrastructure providers (such as energy transmission companies) have such powers, along with Government agencies. In accessing the process, there has to be a compelling case that it is in the public interest.

Neil went on to give various examples where CPOs had been used to the benefit of communities. In the St James Quarter of Edinburgh the private sector had met the local authority's costs. At Panneton Place in Bo'ness, Falkirk Council working with a housing association had acquired a single abandoned property which was subsequently refurbished and rented out to a family awaiting housing. In Roseangle in Dundee a fire-damaged category 'B' property is now ready for sale as a private property. The Queen's Hall in Dunoon has been rejuvenated and in Perth, Mill Street now benefits from a vastly improved streetscape creating an improved cultural corridor linking the Theatre with the Arts Centre.

Support is available to local authorities even if that is simply by way of informal discussion perhaps to establish what it is hoped might be achieved or what public benefit might ensue. Councils undoubtedly have wide-ranging CPO powers but should not be bashful about plagiarising the thinking behind and around other CPO applications. Tips include ensuring that proposals are both sound and justifiable and, above all, that there are associated public benefits, be they ecological, social, or environmental.

4. The morning's final speaker was James Turner of Historic Environment Scotland (HES), based at Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH website www.historicenvironment.scot

HES is the lead public body established as a Government agency with charitable status to investigate, care for, and promote Scotland's historic environment. It implements Scotland's historic environment policy, has responsibility for buildings and monuments in State care, as well as substantial collections of manuscripts, drawings and photographs. HES can also provide funding for conservation works and education across Scotland.

James spoke enthusiastically of Scotland's outstanding heritage and of new partnerships which have developed between the historic environment and the creative economy which have opened up new opportunities to share this heritage with others. He believed strongly that the historic environment can be used to build stronger sustainable communities and to demonstrate the crucial role of heritage in place-making. He felt all communities could benefit from an HES kick-start, especially at a time when communities were re-appraising their own needs and the needs of their people. The ultimate challenge was to sensitise to their heritage those people who were not normally sensitised.

The **AFTERNOON SESSION** was chaired by **Alistair Scott, a conservation architect with Smith Scott Mullen of Edinburgh**. He has worked on diverse projects across Scotland from the current regeneration of Stranraer Waterfront to a community master plan for purchase of a harbour in the Mull of Kintyre in Carradale. He is a past chair of the Scottish Civic Trust. He was brought up in Ayr and went to Ayr Academy. He opened the session by pointing out the policies emanating from the Scottish Government and how the conference gave an opportunity to concentrate on how to work together on delivering these policies and regenerating our town centres.

1. The first speaker was Dave Thomson, Head of the Scottish Government Community Land Team (including abandoned detrimental and neglected land and buildings) website
<https://www.gov.scot/policies/land-reform/community-right-to-buy/>

Under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 a community body can form a compliant company to apply to register an interest in land and the opportunity to buy that land. CLS works to inspire aspirant communities and influence the policies which can help them, feeling that when communities purchase the land on which they live and work, its people are freed to reinvigorate their areas and improve prospects for future generations. The purchase can quickly stimulate feelings of confidence which empowers communities to develop new economic opportunities.

Dave outlined procedures in some detail with evidence of community support being an important prerequisite of any application to Scottish Ministers. The latter seek comment from the owner, at the same time prohibiting a sale to another party. If the owner is agreeable to sell an independent valuation is arranged and Scottish Ministers arrange a ballot of the whole community to determine whether there is an adequate level of support. Should Right to Buy be approved there are specified timescales within which to complete the sale.

2. The afternoon's second speaker was David Henderson, Advisor, Community Ownership Support Services (COSS), which is based at 1 Washington Lane, Edinburgh EH11 2HA website
<https://dtascommunityownership.org.uk>

The purpose of COSS is to help community groups interested in managing, leasing, or owning public assets. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 introduced a right for community bodies to make requests to all local authorities, Scottish Ministers, and a wide ranging list of public bodies

for any land or buildings of which they feel they could make better use. Part 5 of the Act sets down key points such as the need for authorities to produce asset registers. Assets to be considered are not restricted to those identified as being “surplus to requirements” and there is a presumption of agreement to requests unless there exist reasonable grounds for refusal. All applications are published and responses should be forthcoming within clear time frames.

Bodies seeking some measure of transfer may be communities or “geographies of interest”. In responding, authorities will consider the potential for likely promotion or reduction of economic development, regeneration, public health, social well-being, environmental well-being, or any other benefit were there to be agreement to the request. Consideration will be given to whether the eventual transfer will result in something financially viable. Potential applicants can learn much from other applications whether or not they had successful outcomes. For an eventual transfer of a full title, the community body must be a company limited by guarantee with a dissolution clause. Where an application does not fit well with the Act, an approach outwith the Act can be considered.

The afternoon’s final speaker was Una Richards, Chief Executive of the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust (SHBT) which is based at Riddles Court, 322 Lawnmarket, Edinburgh EH1 2PG. website www.shbt.org.uk She and the Trust have long and distinguished track records in the conservation and redevelopment of mainly large historic buildings. The restoration is designed always to make the economics viable. The Trust is particular about the buildings it takes on but has a strong interest in the Ayr Station Hotel. However, Una was here to speak about historic buildings in general.

The Trust takes complex historical buildings preservation projects from inception to completion drawing on over 35 years of project experience. It ensures these properties are then properly cared for and have sustainable futures by finding them new uses and purposes. In giving several examples of the Trust’s work, Una cited two beliefs, the first being that no matter how awful a building is, it can be saved, the second that there are no difficult buildings but there can be difficult owners. She detailed several examples of the Trust’s work, beginning with Broadford Mill in Aberdeen where negotiations had sadly led only to an unsuccessful outcome. Locally Lady Cathcart’s House in Ayr and Auchinleck House had successful outcomes, as did Law’s Close in Kirkcaldy, Greenlaw Town Hall in the Borders, and The Custom House in Leith. These projects had employed various means of funding and she was confident there would be many potential sources available to buildings in Ayr.

Simple measures in the meantime would be worth considering for Ayr Town Centre such as gutter cleans but there was also a need for interested parties to come together to agree a list of buildings in a ranked order which merited saving such that sound and sensible decisions could eventually be made about their future. With the Station Hotel in mind, although it had been made wind and watertight, she had some concern as to whether it was being adequately ventilated under its elaborate waterproof coat.

SOUTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

South Ayrshire Council Leader Douglas Campbell and his deputy Brian McGinley showed commitment by spending the whole day at the conference. Only one of the dozens of questions concerned the Station Hotel and Douglas Campbell was asked to respond to it.

Douglas spoke briefly to thank all who had spoken on the day in such an informative way and those who had organised the conference. With regard to the Station Hotel building he observed that the role of the Council had largely been one of considering public safety. No decision had been made as to whether or not the building should be retained but the long awaited report should be available shortly.

CLOSING DISCUSSION

The final half hour of the afternoon was a session **chaired by Alistair Scott**. About 30 individuals with a particular interest in Ayr town centre remained. The challenge was to agree about the next step. There was the potential to agree priorities, particularly in relation to specific older buildings in the hope that as many as possible could be saved and put to appropriate sustainable use.

It was felt the possible incorporation of a swimming pool within the area of the High Street as proposed by SAC was an attractive idea. Several agreed it would be good to return some elements of town centre commercial property including their upper floors to residential use, something which would necessitate an approach to existing owners and the lobbying of councillors and other politicians to have rental/rates charges reduced. The challenge was restoring and retaining as many existing historic buildings as possible and rethinking the future of Burns Statue Square, restoring some of its former charm.

It was pointed out how the A77 by-pass had taken away much from the commercial life of the town centre although it was acknowledged that the diversion of heavy through traffic had brought many blessings and opportunities as well. The vacant and often inaccessible unused sites behind the façade of the High Street was a concern for some. The lack of town centre hotels was highlighted, and car parking charges were another concern, particularly when motorists incurred no parking charges at places such as Silverburn.

A local business man expressed the view that there was a fair bit of negativity amongst many towards considering any changes in the town. It was agreed joined up thinking was needed for the future of the whole of Ayr. As proceedings drew to a close thoughts went back to the point made earlier in the day that Ayr had much to offer its citizens and visitors when it was pointed out its race course was yet another thing which could be added to the list.

Esther had earlier taken on board that there should be further dialogue about Ayr's needs to ensure that there was a collaborative approach to preserving its considerable architectural heritage. A working group / forum/ town team for Ayr was probably on the cards. It was not the only place in South Ayrshire where this could develop.

The meeting closed at 4.15 PM.

THE CONFERENCE WAS ORGANISED BY AYR STATION HOTEL COMMUNITY ACTION GROUP WITH

SUPPORT FROM SOUTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL AND KYLE & CARRICK CIVIC SOCIETY.

