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Towns, High Streets and Resilience in Scotland: A Question for Policy?

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Abstract: The "death of the high street" has become a common refrain, particularly in the United Kingdom, often accompanied by calls for action and demands for improved resilience in town centres and high streets. This paper considers the policy context for towns and town centres in Scotland and the recent review of the country's approach to towns, town centres and places. With the adoption of National Outcomes linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the declaration of a Climate Emergency, the conclusion is drawn that a more fundamental and radical shift in policy is needed, if the resilience of town centres is to have any meaning, and that a clearer and more widely understood conceptualisation of resilience needs to be developed.

Keywords: retailing; resilience; sustainability; high streets; towns; town centres; public policy; Scotland; United Kingdom

1. Introduction

The "death of the high street" has become a truism in many countries, and especially in the United Kingdom (UK), reflecting the impacts of a move to out-of-town retailing and shopping (a locational shift) and more recently the rise of online or internet shopping (a channel shift). There are a few problems with this narrative, however. Whilst there are undoubted structural changes underway, the pace and extent of these are not pre-defined, nor necessarily impactful on every town. Some high streets and towns are doing well. Secondly, high streets are the retail/commercial components of a place or town. Problems do not necessarily derive from the high street itself, but from wider issues around the vibrancy of a town, urban area or place. Focusing on high streets without this wider context is too partial. Thirdly, whilst retailing is altering in channel and location, physical store retailing remains the dominant form, with complex relationships and inter-dependencies between stores and online remaining unresolved.

Concern over the state of high streets and town centres is not new [1]. The development of hypermarkets, regional shopping centres and other off-centre formats in Europe since the early 1960s came with warnings about their potential impact on existing shops and locations and some restrictive public policy. There has been tension between the "protection" of existing formats and locations and the retailer (and consumer) demand for more modern, efficient, and convenient retail forms. Whilst this has led to policy restrictions on development forms, over time the modernising and efficiency argument has tended to prevail, for reasons of power, concerns over labour and capital productivity and changing consumer capacities (especially of car ownership, credit availability and more recently internet access).

The last decade or so, however, has seen a further set of arguments come to the fore. Rising concern with the planet and the recognition of a climate emergency have raised questions over globalisation, over-consumption and the resilience and sustainability of retail and urban forms. This has recently been further energised by the COVID-19 pandemic, with its requirements to be more local, to focus on the neighbourhood and community and with restrictions on purchases through lockdowns. Whilst online retail

activities have been boosted by the pandemic, the desire for locale or place, even with many town centres and high street shops often closed, has been emphasised. There is a sense of a "tipping-point", based around both pandemic recovery but also a desire for resilience around town centres, high streets, communities and places. The key questions are: what does this mean and how do we achieve this? The often-stated desire to return post-pandemic to "normal" is confronting questions over whether the pre-pandemic "normal" was resilient, sustainable, or indeed desirable.

The aim of this paper is to consider how this current position in the UK ("death of the high street" and the decline of the town centre) has arisen, how this relates to the oft-demanded concept of resilience and what the implications might be for policy. Both conceptual and practical questions and contributions are identified and developed. It is necessary to note that this situation and narrative in the UK does not hold for every place, nor of course for every country. Large cities and towns and places elsewhere may be dominated, for example, by over-tourism or gentrification or be faced by other challenges. Different countries have experienced various dimensions of these issues in their towns and cities, and to differing extents and speeds. Within this, however, urban resilience and the place of retail is a common theme. The focus of this paper on Scotland provides thus both specific situations and responses but also allows wider principles, concepts and lessons to be considered.

There are three main sections to this paper. The first is a conceptual and policy section about the changing relationship of towns, high streets and retailing and the concepts of resilience. This is followed by a section on public policy development in Scotland around these topics, including the recent National Review chaired by the author [2]. Thirdly, the discussion considers the broader implications for policy and the concept of resilience.

2. The Changing Relationship between Towns, High Streets and Retailing and the Concept of Resilience

2.1. Towns, High Streets and Retailing

Towns are communities providing associative benefits from shared activities. The historical shift from peripatetic trading to fixed stores placed retail and other commercial exchanges in proximity with their customers and thus at the heart of a community. The high street—the collection and concentration of these commercial activities—became the centre or core of the place or town. Residents and travellers benefitted from the commonality and shared experience of the location. This is not to say that shopping and other retail and commercial activities always took place in such locations. As communities expanded and as urban areas grew, so both a network and hierarchy of centres emerged, as did local shops in specific residential districts. The high street in a town has never been the sole retail location, nor has it been locationally static, but it was for a long time the predominant form.

In smaller towns, the high street was the key location providing both local, and emerging over time, a wider retail function. Some of this significance derived from activities such as markets, fairs and other special or local events. Others, though, were linked to the presence of larger volumes of people wanting products and/or services. In larger towns, and cities, a network of such centres could clearly be discerned, based often around the development and expansion of residential accommodation, and associated local workplaces. This network of high streets as the focus for retail was not challenged seriously in the UK until the late 1960s. Towns had distinctive local offerings and characteristics, and whilst chain or multiple stores had expanded since at least the 1920s, the overwhelming identity of high streets was local. Cities and the largest towns were more distinctive in scale and scope, and had some more common elements, but retained a local flavour (as in their major department stores). A hierarchy of such town and city centres and locations existed [3–5].

The challenge to this hierarchy of towns, high streets and retailing began with the development of the first regional shopping centres, out-of-town hypermarkets, and super-stores. These, located away from town centre locations, began to separate retailing from place (high streets and towns) and to encourage separate trips for separate purposes, aided by the rise in car ownership. There are many interacting factors here, but increasing afflu-

ence, ownership (house, household goods and car), travel and broader business demands all drove a systemic alteration to what retailing looked like, where it was located and who operated it. A series of waves [6,7] of such developments was permitted and/or then restricted over several decades. The early section (pp. 311–314) of [8] provides a succinct review of this for the United Kingdom, as does [9].

At the outset there was resistance to new forms of development through restrictions on store sizes and requirements for locational permissions to open. As pressure for modernisation mounted, so in the 1980s restrictions were lifted. These were then reimposed somewhat from the 1990s, as the impacts began to be felt on existing businesses, high streets and towns. This, though, has not stopped all off-centre development or re-development [10–15]. The slowing down (and, in some sectors, reversal) of development pressures began with the emergence of the internet as a sales channel in the 1990s and continued as consumer behaviour altered in the 2000s [16–18]. The financial crash late in that decade also caused a re-assessment of the need for and type of retail space required.

The effect of this structural change can be considered in two ways. First, it is important to realise that this decentralisation and disaggregation was taking place not only in retailing, but also in other sectors. Cinemas, offices, housing, workplaces, health services, sports facilities, schools, and universities moved away from existing central locations (towns) to out-of-town and separate, often disparate, locations. Rather than focused on a central place with multiple functions, life became more disaggregated and decentralised, often requiring a car to reach these locations.

Secondly, however, there was not a consequent reaction in high streets and towns. Retail floorspace did not necessarily shrink in total and the system reacted neither quickly nor significantly. However, the continuous withdrawal of retailing and other footfall attractions from many town centres left remaining businesses and other organisations—and the town itself—in a more vulnerable and precarious position. The narrative of high streets in decline became prevalent, often seen visually in vacant or distressed property [19]. This process was uneven, and some towns and high streets prospered [20], but decline has become a truism.

The situation in the UK in the late 2000s was thus of a decentralised retail sector with high streets "left behind". This led in England to the Portas Review; an approach seeing the issue of high streets as a retail one and not as part of a wider set of issues [21,22]. Almost contemporaneous reviews in England [23] and Scotland [24] focused on a wider set of circumstances and solutions, being based around the town and the wider urban system. These three reviews have differences in approach but also common themes and elements [25]. These reviews did not exist in isolation, either before, e.g., [26–28] their publication or subsequently, where there has been further official and other reports on high streets, retailing and town centres, e.g., [29–33]. Academic work has continued to explore these issues and the role of public policy and planning towards retailing and the high street, e.g., [34–39].

Retailing (and many other functions) has become decoupled from both high streets and town centres. High streets and town centres often have old, expensive to operate, and often vacant premises. The costs of operating in town are high. Out-of-town retail is a cheaper option but is car dependent at a time when the climate emergency is becoming evident. All retailing has been affected by the rise of online shopping which, with its different cost structures, has altered commercial competitive models. Urban retail systems at the end of the 2010s were dysfunctional and unsustainable in many ways. The benefits of towns and high streets had been forgotten and dissolved whilst the economic efficiencies of new models had proven to come at a great societal, social and cultural upheaval. The existing forms of the sector itself and the urban locations from which they operate are no longer necessarily seen as sustainable or indeed necessary.

2.2. The Concept of Resilience

Resilience has become one of the key concepts when considering disturbances, shocks, and changes to an existing system. A recent review [40] notes, however, that the concept is multifaceted and that there is no common definition in use. They also note the same for sustainability, a point also raised by [41]. A systematic review [42] of resilience points to the same conclusions and the contestability of the concept, noting that resilience has become a catchword, which has produced an impressive volume of literature, but within which there are inherent difficulties.

Nonetheless, the concept of resilience has become increasingly prevalent in the consideration of social systems. Wrigley and Dolega [20], using Martin's [43] construction, consider the relevance of resilience in the context of retailing, high streets, and town centres. They suggest that the common usage of engineering and ecological resilience does not capture the town centre situation and settle instead on the concept of adaptive resilience (Table 1 provides a summary of these three different concepts of resilience). They view adaptive resilience as (p. 2346) the "anticipatory or reactive reorganisation of the form and function of the system so as to minimise the impact of a destabilising shock".

Table 1. Different interpretations of resilience.

Interpretation/Type of Resilience	Main Focus of Interest
"Engineering" resilience	Ability of a system to return to, or resume, its assumed stable equilibrium state of configuration following a shock or disturbance. Focus is on resistance to shocks and stability near equilibrium.
"Ecological" resilience	The scale of shock or disturbance a system can absorb before it is destabilised and moved to another stable state or configuration. Focus is on "far from equilibrium" behaviour of the system.
"Adaptive" resilience	The ability of a system to undergo anticipatory or reactionary reorganisation of form and/or function so as to minimise the impact of a destabilising shock. Focus is on adaptive capability of the system.

Reprinted from ref. ([43] p. 5).

Dolega and Celinska-Janowicz [44] take this concept of adaptive resilience and develop a framework for considering retail and town centre dynamics. They focus on the adaptive cycle and the ways in which retailers and town centres can adapt to disruption. This disruption could be a specific shock (the financial crash) or more long-running changes (such as in this context out-of-town competition, online retailing, the rise of convenience culture and changes in demography). Aligned with Martin [43], they map four dimensions of retail centre resilience (Figure 1).

A Special Issue of the journal *Cities* comprising an editorial [45] and six papers [46–51] has been devoted to retail planning and urban resilience. This contains both a call to better integrate resilience with retail planning and examples from places in various countries of resilience in practice and how resilience can be enhanced. There are other examples of retail and urban resilience being considered in a place, e.g., [52,53]. Barata-Salgueiro and Guimaraes [54] provide a further review of some of this literature in their conceptual discussion ahead of their data driven analysis of sustainability and retail resilience in Lisbon city centre. They conclude their discussion of the concept of retail resilience thus ([53], p. 4): "the drive . . . to overcome the processes of decline explains . . . the response to external shocks . . . by reposition . . . reinventing . . . reorienting".
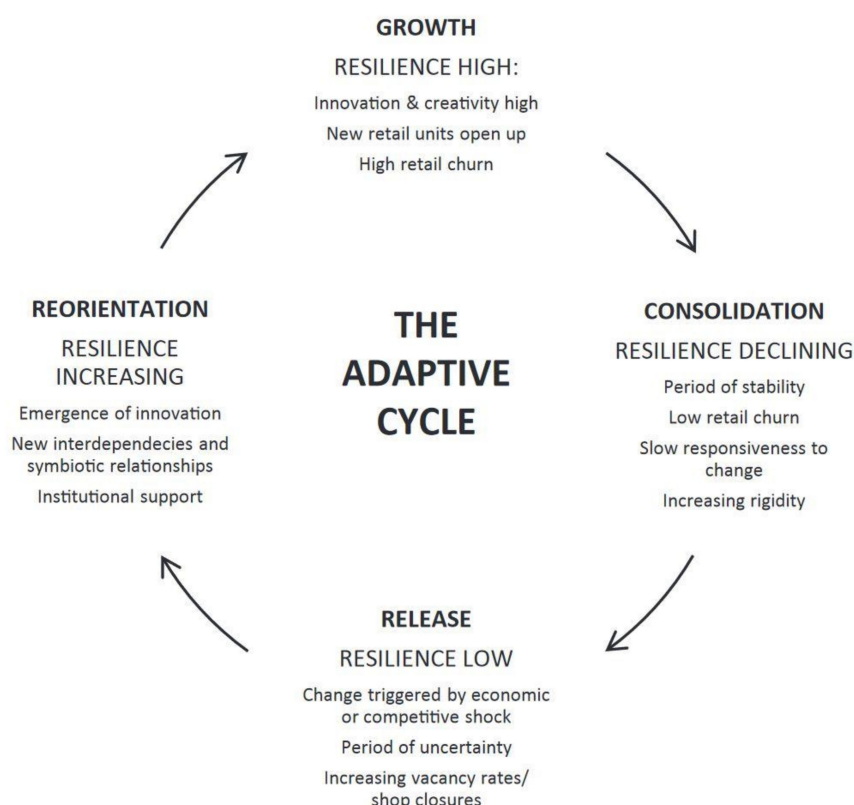
Figure 1. Adaptive cycle of retail centres. Reprinted from ref. ([44], p. 21).

An examination of Table 1 and Figure 1, and of the papers they are drawn from, plus various reviews [40,42,45,54,55] shows that the focus of the concept of resilience derives from a sense of a natural order of things. The concepts are about increasing the resilience and thus protecting the current situation. Nuchter et al. [40] note that "the normativity of resilience is often implicit and rarely critically questioned" (p. 1). Meerow et al. [55], in a more critical review of resilience, point to various unexplored "tensions". This concept of tensions is also identified by Wilson [56] in his broad review of the development of the resilience concept and literature from a geographical perspective. Meerow et al.'s [55] Table 1, listing definitions of resilience in the most cited articles on the topic, points to general thinking that resilience is all about absorbing, withstanding, rebounding and counteracting changes or shocks. A similar conclusion can be drawn from a specific review of urban policies, planning and retail resilience [51].

What is not considered is the extent to which the current structure is delivering against societal and economic needs. Many questions over resilience remain mostly unasked. Meerow and Newell [57] ask fundamental questions for whom, what, where, when and why resilience is sought. All too often these questions remain hidden and unresolved. More recently, it has been noted [40] that resilience is both a state (place resilience) and a process (places becoming resilient) but that the focus stems from an ecological base. This means that its transfer to social systems is not simple; "ecological systems are power neutral; power is a central issue in social systems" ([40], p. 57). This is also picked up by Wilson [56], who points to issues over the philosophical, moral and epistemological assumptions of resilience, its normativity, an over-equation of resilience with sustainability and the interplay of geography/social science aspects including space/scale, power and an underpinning of the continuance of neoliberalism.

This is being seen currently in the debate over the "recovery" from the pandemic. The polarisation of views over a "return to normal" or "build back better" shows this. "Normal" was not working for so many communities, high streets, towns and citizens, so why should or would we want to return to it? Meerow and Newell [57] quote Vale ([58], p. 198): "it is

all too easy to talk about "bouncing back to where we were" without asking which "we" is counted and without asking whether "where we were" is a place to which a return is desirable". This becomes even more apparent when aspects of the climate emergency are considered in tandem with public policy, the recovery from the pandemic and the ways in which the retail and other sectors have contributed to the decline of towns and high streets.

2.3. Intervening in the Urban Retailing System

Enhancing resilience may be about intervening in the urban or retail system. In this context, it is worth recalling therefore the reasons why we might intervene in such systems. Thorpe [59] proposed explicitly for the UK that there were four reasons behind intervening in retailing through land-use planning:

- The retail case—in order not to have too many shops and to have an optimum mix of shops at various levels in the hierarchy;
- The urban case—town centre vitality is necessary and there is a need to manage the morphology of urban areas;
- For social planning—equity in shopping for disadvantaged groups is an aim;
- The environmental case—to minimise the environmental (in a land use sense not in a 21st century sustainability sense) impact of new development and to separate land uses which are incompatible with each other.

These reasons became codified [60,61] as intervention to ensure that the market functions effectively, that the population is served equitably and to correct any other harmful effects of the market. These have been the guiding constructs over the last 40 years; a belief that the market should broadly be left to itself, unless the "harms" become demonstrable. The questions of who benefits and who is harmed should be much more central. It is possible to argue that the reality of the changed context in towns and retailing requires us to consider whether the broader "harms" have indeed become untenable and unsustainable.

The next section considers the national context and the policy response around towns and high streets in Scotland since 2013.

3. Public Policy towards Towns and Retailing since 2013 in Scotland

In 2012, because of the growing concern about, and impact of, changes affecting high streets and town centres, the Scottish Government instituted a National Review of Town Centres under the chairmanship of a leading architect, Malcolm Fraser. The focus was on town centres not high streets, with the problem conceptualised as a place issue and not solely a retail one. This recognises that retailing, especially in urban settings, is dependent on the health of the wider location. Given this emphasis, it is not surprising that the 2013 National Review of Town Centres [24] struck a broad tone [25]. If retailing is to be developed in high streets in town centres, then the broader town centre needs to be considered, developed and protected. The recommendations in the National Review focus on six themes and two over-arching principles. The principles are the need for better data on towns and town centres as a prerequisite for good decision making and the necessity of the extension of the implementation of a Town Centre First Principle to sectors beyond retailing. The six themes focused on the need to support and expand town centre living, digital towns, accessible public services, proactive planning, vibrant local economies, and enterprising communities. From a retail perspective, the absence of retailing as a key theme may seem striking. The belief, however, was that retailing would benefit as town centres became stronger and more resilient.

The recommendations and approach of the National Review of Town Centres [24] were accepted by the Scottish Government and implemented via a Town Centre Action Plan [62]. Scotland's Towns Partnership was funded as a collective national body to bring together the work on towns being performed in communities and organisations across Scotland, and to coordinate demonstration projects and other activities under each of the six themes. Scotland's Towns Partnership was set up to amplify and coordinate activities, energising activities and initiatives at local and national level, rather than as a

central resource that took on performing the initiatives and activities itself. This followed principles of recognising that all towns are unique, and change will be different, and is best undertaken in each distinct town and driven by the local community.

Since 2014, the model set up in Scotland has developed further. The core approach has been recognised widely in and beyond Scotland as being useful and, in many ways, leading. Figure 2 shows how these activities reinforced and built together. The overall effect was both a visible national and local effort to promote and develop towns.
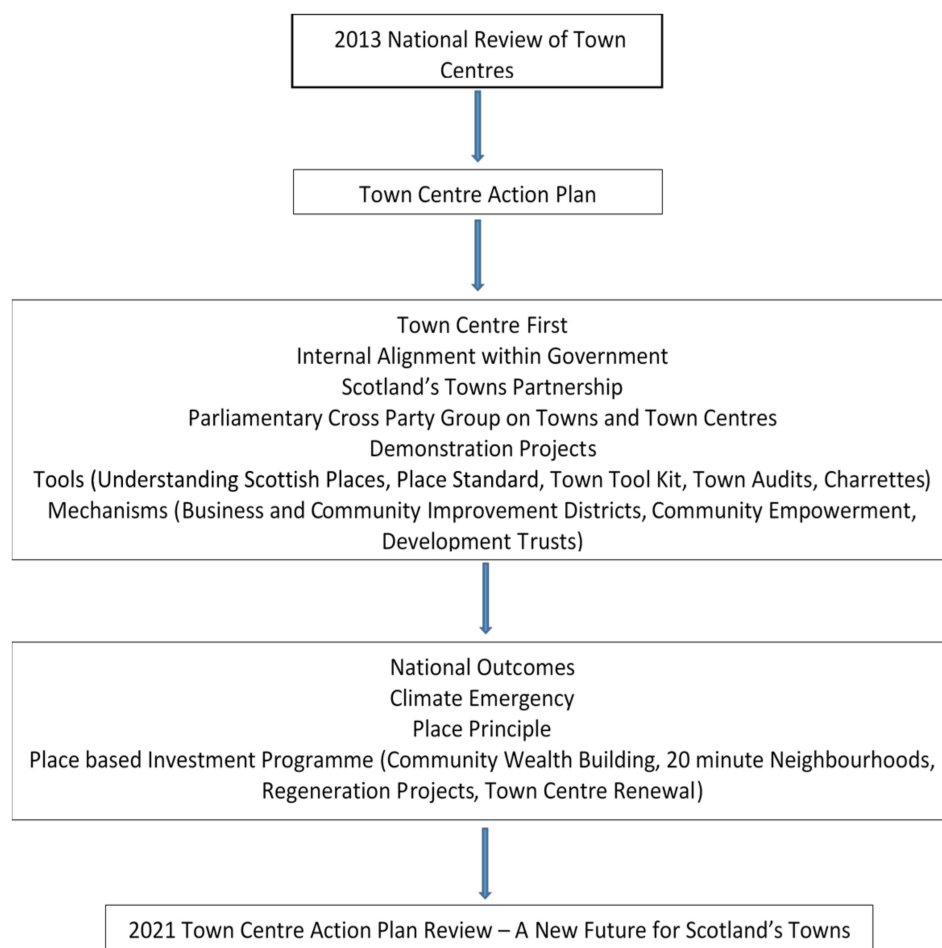

Figure 2. Scotland's Route-Map for Town Centre Renewal and Resilience 2021.

By 2019, it was beginning to be apparent that whilst there had been progress, much remained to be achieved. The early agreement of the Town Centre First Principle had led to some sense of protection from adverse development for town centres. The actions of the Town Centre Action Plan provided a more positive direction for change. These elements were brought together and aligned more strongly by the development of the Place Principle [63], which strengthened an overall approach towards place as key government policy. Within this, the Community Empowerment Act enshrined the role of communities in place and strengthened the role of communities and the community purchase of assets [64].

On a national level, the Scottish Government declared a Climate Emergency. They also adopted a set of National Outcomes which were linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Together, these placed specific duties on organisations across Scotland to do better for their citizens and the country. A key focus for the government was on tackling systemic inequalities in Scotland, including health, poverty, disability and social inclusion. Stronger, more resilient places, communities and towns are clearly at the heart of this.

Policy towards towns was thus quite clearly set out and organised, under the umbrella of the National Outcomes, place-based actions in the Place Principle and Scotland's Towns Partnership. Retail, as set out in the 2013 National Review, was seen as the downstream beneficiary of such an approach. Retailing, though, was undergoing its own challenges in Scotland, as elsewhere. The rise of internet and online retailing continued apace. Whilst out-of-town retail development had largely halted in Scotland in its largest forms, off-centre space continued to be added. The existing cost and tax structures (especially but not only non-domestic rates) continued to impact large space users in urban areas more significantly than online or off-centre retailers. There continued to be major cost and operating disadvantages to running physical shops in urban areas and major fiscal and other advantages of operating online, from warehouses or other fulfilment centres. Retail bodies argued that retailing as a sector was subject to undue burdens compared to other sectors and that physical retailers (especially in town centres) were being priced out of the sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a further challenge to towns and retailing. COVID-19 has been a singularly traumatic and disruptive event and its impacts at all levels are not fully realised or understood at this point. Internet shopping has become a major force faster than anticipated due to lockdown and physical shop restrictions, receiving a major stimulus and attaining peaks of penetration previously viewed as years away. Secondly, the nature of lockdowns has encouraged people to live more locally, and local neighbourhoods and centres and local (especially food) retailers have received a considerable boost. Many people have experienced the benefit of local and community facilities and engagement. Both impacts raise questions about the sustainability and resilience of our pre-existing patterns, in retailing and in town centres, where lockdowns have impacted enormously.

The Scottish Government announced an independent review of the Town Centre Action Plan in July 2020. This reported to the government at the end of 2020 and was published in February 2021 [2]. In requesting the Review, it was made clear by the government that whilst consideration had to be given to progress made, the desire to have greener and healthier towns and town centres and the National Outcomes and context also had to be better reflected. The Review was requested to come up with a vision for town centres in Scotland and adopted the following: "*Towns and town centres are for the wellbeing of people, planet and the economy. Towns are for everyone and everyone has a role to play in making our towns and town centres successful.*" ([2], p. 21).

This vision developed from the debates about towns and town centres which focused on their role as a social and cultural focus as well as an economic one. Whilst the "high street" is important to the town, it is not the only function of a town or town centre. The vision also reflects the need to ensure that communities have a greater and more direct say in their town centres and that their sense of localism should be rekindled, i.e., the decisions need to be taken not by distant corporations or landlords but much closer to home. Finally, the need for sustainability in the light of the climate emergency is also paramount. Town centres are the most sustainable place for many activities (this was their original conception—see [24]) and this needs to be recognised, developed, and supported.

In attempting to understand how to deliver this vision, the Review considered the progress to date, the desire to go further and faster (and the barriers to achieving this) and the activities that could be seen as damaging town centres and thus adversely impacting resilience and sustainability. This led to three areas for recommendations, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. A New Future for Scotland's Towns—Recommendations.

Recommendation	Main Foci of Recommendation
1. Strengthen the existing national policy context.	Strengthen the formal positioning of towns and town centres in National Planning including requirements to produce town and town centre plans, coproduced with communities, and enhance data collection and use at the town and town centre level.
2. Stop supporting activities which cause harm to our town centres.	Scottish Government should review the current, tax, funding and development systems to ensure that wellbeing, economy and climate outcomes, fairness and equality are at their heart. This could include: • Amendments to rates; • Amendments to VAT; • Introduce a digital tax; • Introduce an out-of-town car parking space levy; • Introduce a moratorium on out-of-town development.
3. Extend existing activities and approaches to accelerate town centre renewal.	Scottish Government should continue to expand funding and ensure that it is aligned, substantial, multi-year and covers revenue and capital costs, whilst being focused around themes of: • Town centre living expansion; • Digital skills and uses in towns; • Enterprising communities, including a Strategic Acquisition Fund; • Climate change responses.

The direction from the 2013 Town Centre Action Plan was seen to be an appropriate way forward. The position of town centres and communities in the formal planning framework can be enhanced further, and this opportunity should be taken in the upcoming 2021 revision to provide added impetus to focusing development in town centres. A strengthening of the progress made on data for towns decision-taking was also proposed, broadening and deepening the data included thus far on the Understanding Scottish Places development [65]. The individual themes from the 2013 Town Centre Action Plan were also reconsidered and a revised focus was presented around town centre living, digital skills in towns, enterprising communities and climate change response. These re-focus the original themes with the addition of climate action. However, the emphasis within them is altered to encompass a strengthening for communities, localisation and diversity, aligned with topics and approaches such as Community Wealth Building [66], 20-min neighbourhoods [67] and active travel.

The concepts of the 20-min neighbourhood and Community Wealth Building provide an opportunity to focus on local centres and neighbourhoods. The former is an attempt to ensure that the main facilities citizens or consumers want can be found within a 20-min walk of where they live. This is a change in locational priorities. The latter is about the type of facilities and organisations found in these localities and the ways in which these operate (e.g., five key principles of plural ownership of the economy, making financial power work for local places, fair employment and just labour markets, progressive procurement of goods and services, and socially productive use of land and property).

The Review also argued, however, that on its own these recommendations and actions (1 and 3 in Table 2) "simply" continue, focus and expand existing actions and activities. Whilst the Scottish Government has committed to supporting these and has produced

a combined Place Based Investment Programme over 5 years to make this happen, the Review argues that this will be insufficient. Whilst this investment is positive, welcome and will make a difference, especially where aligned with other programmes internal to government and with other public and private bodies and companies, it is having to fight against other areas of government policy. Therefore, Recommendation 2 is significant. The recommendation marks an explicit proposed change of emphasis for government and policy generally and on towns, retail, and other sectors.

Recommendation 2 of the Review addresses the question of whether government policy is actively working against the desire to enhance our town centres and whether it is actively promoting damaging activities ("harms"). It reassesses why we intervene in urban systems and towns. The Review finds that the current approach is creating conditions that harm town centres and ambitions for them and prioritising unsustainability and a lessening of resilience (however defined). Consequently, the Review proposes reversals of government policies (especially on tax and costs) to enable town centres to have a fair chance of flourishing and meeting the vision set out for them. Some aspects of the Recommendation (Table 2) call for concerted national (and international) action on digital and other tax reduction schemes. Nationally, they propose a rebalancing of tax regimes to encompass currently untaxed or lightly taxed activities, e.g., digital operations and sales and deliveries, differential VAT and tax costs favouring new build and out-of-town development and the adverse impacts of charging for car parking in-town as opposed to out-of-town. A moratorium on out-of-town development and a tax on out-of-town car parking address aspects of this and the damaging unsustainable aspects of car dependency.

The recommendations seek to rebalance the situation in favour of town centres. It is argued that without that rebalancing, spending more money in town centres to rectify issues and promote activity will likely have a finite impact. Behaviours of companies, organisations, developers, and consumers have to change if our urban places are to be resilient and sustainable. This inevitably means rethinking our entire approach to off-centre development and travel. It is also important to note that whilst the proposals will affect retail, they are not directed solely at them. All off-centre activity needs to be subject to these revised tax structures, levies, and operational constraints. At the same time, the costs on operations in town centres, for all and not just retail, need to be accordingly reduced.

At this point, it is of course not known if, or how, many of these recommendations will be implemented. That is the task for the incoming Scottish Government (elections May 2021) and for further debate and discussion. It is worth noting, however, that the approach being developed follows a developmental path focused on place, not on any one sector, and on putting National Outcomes at the heart of our decision-making. It answers the question of why we should intervene (the wider "harms") and begins to open up consideration of what is meant by resilience of town centres and towns. Failure to do so condemns us to rerun the history of the last 50 years; we need to do better and be more radical if our urban (retail) systems are to meet the needs and visions we should have.

4. Discussion

The "death of the high street" has become a commonplace way, especially in the UK, of describing the situation faced by retailers and town centres. Assailed by over half a century of disaggregation and decentralisation, retailing has become increasingly divorced from the communities it once served, and from their town centres. Discrete, car-borne trips to individual, decentralised spaces have become the norm for so many activities, including retailing. Public policy in the UK has more recently aimed at directing retailing to town centres and at protecting town centres. This has had some success, but the crisis of town centres has continued to develop, not least because the retail sector is experiencing massive change, now requires less space and is under severe commercial pressure. Sectors beyond retailing have been increasing their off-centre space and contribute further to the removal of functions from town centres. This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

This is the background to the rising interest in the concept of resilience for both the retail sector and town centres. Resilience, as shown in this paper, is a concept that has attracted increasing interest and its application to town centres and retailing has developed widely. Key topics include what makes a town resilient and how do we increase resilience of town centres, the retail sector and individual retailers? Increasing resilience has mainly focused on improving the attractiveness of town centres and retailers. Public policy in the UK has attempted to support this through protecting town centres, trying to improve the viability of town centres by easing new developments in town centres (housing, commercial and others) and by trying to reduce the extent of new competition. This, though, has only made small inroads to the situation. This may be because decentralisation in many sectors continues apace and the competition for town centres is already strongly established.

The example of Scotland used in this paper places policy towards town centres (and implicitly the resilience of town centres, high streets, and retailing) in a broad national context. Scotland has led the way in the UK in the last decade over how to try to support and enhance town centres. There have been successes. It is recognised, however, that even this approach does not go far enough, especially when new National Outcomes based around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are considered. The intersection of resilience and sustainability has become more important.

There is widespread acceptance that town centres need to be resilient. There is increasing agreement over what makes a good town centre. These reflect a set of implicit assumptions about benefits and desirability. Supporting "good" things has been seen as the way to deliver this resilience and positive places. The critique of the concept of resilience provided in this paper, and which implicitly underpins the proposals in the recent National Review in Scotland (and other work being undertaken by the Scottish Government), points to the need to confront a wider set of tensions. It also indicates a need to revisit the reasons we intervene in the market, particularly in the light of demands for places (towns) to be healthier, greener, and more sustainable, given the climate emergency and sustainable goals. Five tensions are considered here.

First, in the context of town centres and retailing, there needs to be more clarity around the concept of resilience and particularly the purpose of resilience. The current assumptions about the benefits of resilience for a location need to be explicitly outlined for (by) that town and the community; too often this is not done, and it is not clear who benefits from resilience, why and to what effect.

Secondly, the focus in town and town centre resilience is often on capacity to rebound, absorb or counteract type constructs. The reality, however, may well be that the system is not working for the local community or town and there are many problems of access, unmet demand and a lack of wider, local inter-relationships and networks. Resilience thus has to encompass the idea that there could well be a considerable challenge to the existing order of things, ways of acting and types of organisations and impacts, if a place or town is to be resilient. Towns are about communities, and thus resilient towns need to be about resilience for the benefit of that community. The origins of the issues might differ in various towns and indeed countries, but the underlying principle holds.

Thirdly, there are clearly locational and sustainable tensions in town centre resilience. Many towns have been challenged by the ongoing decentralisation of activities (not just retailing). These are increasingly being recognised as unsustainable development, with wider detrimental effects. The challenge posed by the concept of the 20-min neighbourhood is about making locations work for the community using active travel modes, by having residences and facilities located in reasonable proximity. The challenge is to stop supporting damaging decentralisation and unsustainable activities. One approach is to rethink the cost structures of development. This implies changing cost burdens, including a greater recognition of the inappropriate balance currently between in-town and out-of-town development and operations, new build and renovation cost disparities and the imbalance between private and social costs and benefits.

Fourthly, there is a more fundamental issue over how the system works and for whom. The dominance of a small number of large firms in many sectors and their reliance on their national and international networks cause issues for the resilience of towns and local businesses. Community Wealth Building as a concept focuses on how activities are performed, who performs them and how well they perform them in terms of how they are organised, who is engaged and who benefits. This implies a different definition of resilience to encompass local networks and inter-relationships and to view these as integral to the resilience of a town. Developing resilience thus becomes a local matter about building capacity and diversity. This is readily applicable to towns and retailing.

Fifthly, these tensions and their potential directions of development bring the issue of why intervention occurs in the market. The current system has seen places and people left behind and without access to basic needs and facilities. In many towns, the current system makes things too hard for too many people and increases and perpetuates various inequalities. The widespread dominance of distant firms and businesses (and of that one model of operation) reduces local opportunities and leaves towns at the mercy of decisions taken hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away. All this is damaging to health, well-being, and local prosperity. Within this, the fact that policy makes it easier and cheaper to develop away from existing towns and town centres exacerbates the problems. Intervention is required as things are not working, especially to the benefit of many local communities, but also increasingly in terms of broader environmental sustainability.

The practical conclusions from this analysis imply a rethinking of policy to be more radical and more in tune with this revised concept of resilience. This must be not only about supporting activities but of stopping others. It requires national level policy frameworks but implementation at the local and community level. Individual towns are distinct, and those differences and their local needs should be accommodated at the local level, if resilience is to be developed and mean anything. This is important whatever the sources of the issues around the sustainability and resilience of town and city centres.

Conceptually, this paper is aligned with the stronger critiques of the use of the concept of resilience in social science. Resilience needs to be rethought and its underpinnings made explicit. Currently, too many papers on resilience in the urban, town or retail context ignore issues of space and scale, power relations and their consequences, and view protection of the prevailing status quo as inherently of benefit ("return to normal" or "bounce back" post-pandemic are current manifestations). A conceptualisation is needed that is broader but more locally adaptable and one that recognises that the current system and position of towns and town centres were created within a system geared to do just that, and that consequently, resilience might well be about creating a new, more locally engaged situation. The "death of the high street" narrative in the UK reflects a socially constructed situation, but one that is not inevitable; it can be reversed by rethinking and stating what is important in our social, economic, and cultural identities at the town level.

Conflicts of Interest: The author has been involved in the development of the policy approach in Scotland for at least the last decade. He was a member of the 2013 National Review of Town Centres [24]. He became the Chair of the Board of Scotland's Towns Partnership in 2013 and was invited in 2020 by the Cabinet Secretary (the term in Scotland for the Government Minister) to Chair of the Review of the Town Centre Action Plan, which has led to the publication of "A New Future for Scotland's Towns" [2].

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