

Criticism of plans for town centres



Small businesses, infrastructure experts and politicians have criticised a Scottish Government plan to revitalise town centres.

The 'Town Centre Action Plan' was launched by Local Government Minister Derek Mackay yesterday, and it promises a 'Town Centre First Principle' with £2m funding to turn empty properties into affordable housing, and tax cuts for pubs, hotels and restaurants.

Speaking at the launch, Mr Mackay said:- "The Scottish Government is determined that our town centres should be vibrant, attractive and safe places where local people and visitors alike want to spend their time and money."

However, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) Scotland voiced frustration with the plans. Colin Borland, head of external affairs at FSB Scotland, said he was "underwhelmed" and disappointed at the "vague" proposals put forward.

Derek Halden, an infrastructure consultant who conducted research for Transport Scotland's 'Smarter Choices, Smarter Places' project, expressed disappointment the plan did not include any immediate investment in paths and streets. He continued:- "The paths to the shops, the street furniture like benches, pedestrian crossings, cycle parking, new paving and public art projects are just a few of the things that would make accessing town centres easier and more pleasant."

"Until people have safe pleasant routes to their local centres they will just jump into their car and go elsewhere, which

does nothing to reinvigorate local town centres,” said Mr Halden.

His research shows this investment could save Scots £279m each year in transport costs, money which could be spent in local shops and businesses.

MSPs have also been critical. Green MSP Alison Johnstone said:-“The sums of money being set aside are pitiful and will not give local businesses and residents confidence. We need to see support for local champions who can get things done, not a new title for a minister in Edinburgh.”

Meanwhile, Conservative finance spokesman Gavin Brown said that the £2m pledged, when shared across the whole of Scotland, amounts to just £65,000 for each local authority.

Mr Brown said that while the SNP were announcing plans to “make it look like they’re doing a lot about town centres,” they were also shutting police stations and courts.

“They’ve taken a lot of actions in the last months that actually make it tougher for town centres.”