

Scottish Government has plans for town centres



Plans to breathe new life into town centres across Scotland have been unveiled by Local Government Minister Derek Mackay today.

Included in the plan is an expansion of the rates relief scheme for new businesses to include pubs, restaurants and hotels in a bid to diversify the high street.

The Town Centre Action Plan is a cross-government response to the independent National Review of Town Centres, published in July.

The Action Plan addresses the recommendations of the Review and out-lines proposed joint working between public, private and community sectors.

Actions include:

Expanding the 'Fresh Start' business rates relief to apply to pubs, hotels and restaurants from 1 April 2014 and to increase the thresholds of the scheme from property with a rateable value of £45,000 to £65,000

£2 million towards a Town Centre Housing Fund to help bring empty town centre properties back into use

Working with COSLA to develop a town centre first principle. This will include a series of demonstration projects specifically targeting areas identified by the Review group

Powers for local authorities to establish Town Centre

Investment Zones

£120,000 for Town Centre charettes – grants available to help deliver community design meetings specifically focused on town centres

Launching a competition for entrepreneurs to drive forward town centre regeneration ideas

Local Government and Planning Minister Derek Mackay named as dedicated Minister for Town Centres

Maintaining the Small Business Bonus Scheme for the life of the current Parliament, removing or substantially reducing the rates burden for thousands of town centre properties

Working with stakeholders to identify support priorities for Business Improvement District (BID) projects

Investigating ways of expanding the role of Scottish Future Trust place-based reviews

Speaking during his visit to Bank Street in Kilmarnock, which, due to the efforts of East Ayrshire Council, local traders groups and businesses, reached 100 per cent occupancy in October this year, 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.

“They should be accessible places which invite business start-up and inspire innovative ideas from all walks of the community. We welcomed the independent review earlier this year and the crucial role it will play in the regeneration of high streets across Scotland.

“In response to this we are today publishing an Action Plan which will encourage and support action across the wider

public, private and community sectors.

“We recognise the importance of securing the future of our high streets as the economic centre of our towns. This is why we have expanded Fresh Start – our rates relief scheme for new businesses – to include pubs, hotels and restaurants and increasing the thresholds for the scheme.

“Our town centres should also be places where we live and socialise, which is why we have allocated £2 million towards a housing fund to bring empty properties back into use as homes and are supporting community design charettes through £120,000 in funding.

“The plan marks a new era for Scotland’s town centres and we will continue to work in partnership with local authorities, private and community organisations to ensure they are vibrant places to live, work and socialise.”

Malcolm Fraser, the architect who led the Town Centre Review, said: -“What I think we have here, is a change of Government mindset: a reversal of the throw-away habit that abandons old towns, with their communities, infrastructure and services, for greenfield sites.

“I’m impressed at the Government’s determination to promote a new, town-centred culture across its policy-making and decision-taking. Next is for Local Authorities to embrace the challenges and opportunities this brings, and for our business and communities to be encouraged and enabled.”

Councillor Douglas Reid, leader of East Ayrshire Council said:-“Within East Ayrshire we want our town centres to be vibrant, bustling places where people can work, shop, live and socialise and we are working very hard to ensure positive change for our communities.

“The Bank Street area of Kilmarnock is the perfect example of what can be achieved. Over many years, this area has

benefitted from investment in regeneration projects and owners of buildings have been given help to restore and upgrade their premises. The Council has also worked to enhance the look of the street with improved street furniture and lighting, new cobbles and street artwork.”

During his visit Mr Mackay met with traders on Bank Street, including Coffee Press owner, Alisdair Hood.

Mr Hood said:-“Bank Street is bucking the trend with 100 per cent occupancy and lots of independent shops.

“For me a town centre should be the beating heart of a community and we all have a role to play in developing our town centres.”