

Institution: University of Stirling		
Unit of Assessment: 17. Business and Management Studies		
Title of case study: Reversing the Decline of Scotland's Town Centres		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Leigh Sparks Anne Findlay	Professor of Retail Studies Research Fellow (now Emerita)	1983 to date 1998 to 07/2015
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Many Scottish town centres have been losing activities and vibrancy, leading to vacancy, decay and dereliction adversely affecting place and identity, economic activity and social inclusion and cohesion. Our research to provide solutions to reverse the decline of Scotland's town centres has enabled:</p> <p>Impact 1: the development of the Scottish Government's place-based renewal policy the Town Centre Action Plan, various Town Centre Funds (GBP68,000,000) and the Place Based Investment Programme (GBP275,000,000);</p> <p>Impact 2: the leadership of the implementation of the Town Centre Action Plan through Scotland's Towns Partnership (viewed as exemplary in the UK), which directly received GBP7,500,000 funding for demonstration, renewal and Covid emergency response projects;</p> <p>Impact 3: the development of the public access data platform Understanding Scottish Places, leading to evidence-based strategic planning and redevelopment at the town level.</p> <p>These impacts have made significant contributions to reversing the decline of Scottish town centres, benefitting individuals, communities, businesses, and organisations.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning Research</p> <p>Research at the University of Stirling has provided policy advice for the Scottish Government. In 2002 Sparks and Findlay (with commercial partners) evaluated the effectiveness of the main retail planning policy for town centres (R1). This evaluation suggested the development of a higher profile in policy for town centres. The research proposed policy revisions to promote town centres as efficient, competitive, and innovative locations, including a stronger requirement for town centre strategies and vitality/viability studies and the need for a place-based policy encouraging flexibility. This research led directly to the revision of national policy.</p> <p>In 2008 Sparks and Findlay undertook a review of policies to support a healthy retail sector and retail-led regeneration in town centres for the Scottish Government. This research (R2) clarified the relationship of retailing, regeneration and town centres and encouraged policy to focus on the nature of places and towns rather than on retail alone. The research identified that the issue was not only a retail one, but rather a town or place-based problem, requiring wider solutions.</p> <p>Sparks' research and thought leadership through Chairing the Centre for Scottish Public Policy's Towns Group led to the Scottish Government appointing him to the 2012/13 National Review of Town Centres. The Review's Report (R3) presented a road map for the reversal of town centre decline, based on six themes (town centre living, digital towns, proactive planning, accessible public services, vibrant local economies and enterprising communities) encompassed within two over-arching principles (Town Centre First and consistent and comparable town data). This (and other research R4) led directly to the Town Centre Action Plan (Impact 1), the confirmation of Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP) as the lead body on implementing towns policy in Scotland (Impact 2) and the development of the data platform Understanding Scottish Places (Impact 3).</p>		
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>R1. CB Richard Ellis, University of Stirling (Findlay A and Sparks L) and Colin Buchanan and Partners (2004) The Effectiveness of NPPG8: Town Centres and Retailing. Available at: http://stir.ac.uk/54f</p>		

R2. Findlay A and L Sparks (2009) Policies adopted to support a healthy retail sector and retail led regeneration and the impact of retail on the regeneration of town centres and local high streets. Scottish Government. Available at <http://stir.ac.uk/54i>

R3. External Advisory Group (2013) Community and Enterprise in Scotland's Town Centres: National Review of Town Centres. Available at: <http://stir.ac.uk/54i>

R4. Findlay A and L Sparks (2014) High streets and town centres policy, in Wrigley N and E Brookes (2014) Evolving High Streets: Resilience and Reinvention, ESRC/University of Southampton. Available at: <http://stir.ac.uk/54o>

4. Details of the impact

Reversing the decline of town centres depends on place-based policies that take a holistic and collaborative approach (see **R1-4**). Sparks' research, leadership and expertise has developed and built on this core principle to enshrine it in Scottish Government policy and initiatives (**Impacts 1-3**). Neil McInroy (Chief Executive, Centre for Local Economic Strategies) writes "Professor Sparks' role in advancing progressive place making and local economic policy action with Scotland has been significant. From his core retail studies expertise, Prof Sparks can 'join the dots' and make connections with other agendas which serve to advance the praxis toward achieving vibrant, prosperous and just places" (**S1**). David Cowan, Head of Regeneration for the Scottish Government summarises this process:

"The research undertaken by Leigh Sparks led to his appointment to the National Review of Town Centres in 2012/13. The Scottish Government response to this (the Town Centre Action Plan) has proved highly successful and influential, including informing policy elsewhere in the UK. Much of this impact has been due to Professor Sparks' leadership of Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP). STP have proved an invaluable partner as the Scottish Government have implemented the Town Centre Action Plan and developed policies, actions and investments around Town Centre First, the Place Principle, Understanding Scottish Places and the Place-Based Investment Programme. Professor Sparks (and his research) has had a major impact on policy, strategy and thinking around towns." (**S2**)

Impact 1: The Town Centre Action Plan

In November 2013, the Scottish Government responded to the National Review of Town Centres (**R3**) by announcing its [Town Centre Action Plan](#) (TCAP), which forms the core of its approach to revitalising Scottish town centres. TCAP progressed the Town Centre First Principle, utilised the leadership of Scotland's Towns Partnership to drive forward thematic projects from the National Review (**Impact 2**) and helped fund and develop a unique towns data platform, Understanding Scotland's Places (**Impact 3**). As **S2** (above) shows, Sparks and his research was essential to the development of the TCAP and the impacts it has had and that have stemmed from it.

Town Centre First

In July 2014 the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) agreed the [Town Centre First Principle](#), "marking a significant shift in public policy towards town centres" (**S3a**). The Principle encapsulates the core findings of the underpinning research, expanding the concept of town-centre regeneration beyond the previously prevalent retail-only approach. It brings together all public sector bodies, businesses, and communities under a shared banner of investment in town centres and was a milestone in broadening stakeholder understanding of what successful town centre regeneration requires. As an example, Aberdeenshire Council fully embedded Town Centre First into its policy and operations, for which it won a COSLA award in 2018. It then developed a Town Centre Toolkit to guide town centre projects and the use of GBP2,700,000 from the Government Town Centre Fund (see Impact 2) across ten projects (**S4a**). In Falkirk, the Council decided to build its new council buildings in the town centre as part of a major GBP43,500,000 mixed use development (**S4b**), reversing a prior plan to build out of town.

The Place Principle

In 2019 the Scottish Government and COSLA extended Town Centre First by adopting the [Place Principle](#) to overcome organisational and sectoral boundaries, encourage stronger collaboration and community involvement, and improve the impact of combined energy, resources and investment. The principle was established by partners (including STP, see Impact 2) to help develop clear visions for places. It promotes a shared understanding of place, and the need to take a more collaborative approach to a place's services and assets to achieve better outcomes

for people and communities. The Place Principle supports Scotland's [National Performance Framework](#).

Place-Based Investment Programme

Arising from the Place Principle, the 2020 Programme for Government committed to establishing the GBP275,000,000 [Place Based Investment Programme \(S5\)](#), linking and aligning place-based funding initiatives and ensuring that all place-based investments are shaped by the needs and aspirations of local communities. This programme will impact through four over-lapping and inter-connected approaches (*Town Centre Action, Community Wealth Building, Community led Regeneration, 20-minute Neighbourhoods*).

Impact 2: Scotland's Towns Partnership

In 2014 the Scottish Government requested [Scotland's Towns Partnership \(STP\)](#) to lead, drive and oversee the implementation and delivery of TCAP. STP had been formed from the Centre for Scottish Public Policy Towns Group and Sparks was asked to be its inaugural Board chair (a position he still holds) due to his research (**R4**), ongoing thought leadership on town developments in Scotland and role in the National Town Centre Review (**R3**). STP focuses and aligns TCAP work through its partners and members ([membership of 250 organisations](#) as of July 2020), working with all councils and most major Scottish organisations (e.g. Development Trusts, Carnegie UK Trust, BT Scotland, Scotrail, Sustrans, YoungScot, Visit Scotland, TSB, Historic Environment Scotland, Zero Waste Scotland, SPEN). STP's leadership of TCAP was enabled by operating funding of GBP1,460,000, and approximately GBP2,000,000 for demonstrator projects between 2013 and 2020. In 2019 the Government introduced the GBP50,000,000 [Town Centre Fund](#) which STP jointly administered, followed in 2020 by the GBP18,000,000 Towns Capital Fund. These funds in turn leveraged significant investment at local levels, as Douglas Reid, Leader of East Ayrshire Council testifies:

"The resources and support of Scotland's Towns Partnership helped to create a renewed focus on towns which in turn assisted us in securing the £20m UK National Energy Research Demonstrator in Cumnock alongside the Ayrshire College, Council HQ, Halo Innovation Hub and substantial other regeneration investments in our key town of Kilmarnock, which won Scotland's Most Improved Town Award in 2016." (**S6a**)

STP's small core team, directed by the Board (which Sparks chairs and leads) also leads activities to promote towns more widely including (details at www.scotlandstowns.org):

1. The establishment of a Parliamentary Cross Party Group (CPG) for Towns and Town Centres (with STP as secretariat) providing a regular parliamentary forum on towns (**S6b**).
2. An annual National Conference, National Towns Week, MSP Connectors Programme, training and learning events, advice to local organisations and councils and demonstration projects (e.g. Digital towns - Cupar, Sustainable towns - Cumnock, Paisley Visioning).
3. A web portal and central resource hub including significant towns tools (e.g. the Towns Toolkit, the Place Standard), which since 2015 to 2020 has been visited by 325,000 users with over 800,000 page views (**S6c**).
4. A strong media presence, such as [regular supplements with The Herald newspaper](#) which generated a wider public awareness of towns issues, had Ministerial engagement and promoted specific towns (**S6d**).

As Phil Prentice, Chief Officer of Scotland's Towns Partnership testifies:

"The work of Professor Sparks has positioned Scotland as a global leader in relation to policy and interventions for towns and smaller settlements. His Chairmanship of Scotland's Towns Partnership and his University and commercial research, provided the Government and sector stakeholders with the confidence to drive this agenda forward." (**S6c**)

The Scottish Government has recognised STP's initiatives as key achievements (**S3b**) in pushing forward TCAP, providing leadership and collaboration across Scotland, improving public and professional understanding of the issues involved in town centre regeneration, and facilitating potential solutions. In 2018 the independent and influential [Grimsey Review 2](#) (led by a leading ex-retailer), which examined the state of town centres across the UK, recognised Scotland's pioneering research-led approach to town centre regeneration leadership and collaboration,

stating that because of the work of the STP and TCAP “Scotland leads the way” in the UK (S7a. p.25). Bill Grimsey reinforces Sparks’ research and leadership role within this:

“In large part thanks to Prof. Sparks essential leadership, and the solid research foundation this has brought, Scotland is leading the way across the four UK nations and globally on town-centred focused holistic urban regeneration. The collaborative, research-led approach in Scotland and the results that has produced, including the important TCAP and resultant initiatives like the Scotland’s Towns Partnership, has become a best-practice model for others to follow. This informed the Grimsey Review 2 and the model is being replicated in England with the English High Streets Task Force and its implementation body the Institute for Place Management.” (S7c)

This was further reinforced (S7b. p.5) by the 2018 Timpson Report (The High Street Report for the UK Government) which noted “We were impressed by the work already done by Scotland’s Town Partnership”. STP’s leadership work has also been recognised internationally, leading to the World Towns Leadership Summit being hosted in Edinburgh in 2016 (S8). Informed by research, including R4, this developed the World Towns Framework (WTF – S8), which is being refined internationally before being brought back to Scotland in 2021 as part of the Urban Economy Forum/United Nations Habitat Day.

Impact 3: Understanding Scottish Places

The underpinning research (particularly R3 but also R1-2) identified the lack of comprehensive, reliable, and accessible towns-based data. Sparks and Findlay collaborated with others to create Understanding Scottish Places (www.usp.scot launched 2015 by the then Minister) (S9a). This novel and free to use data resource provides rigorously consistent and comparable data for towns across Scotland, enabling positive reflection by place managers and others on town assets and potential. It continues to open up new data sources for towns, encourage government and other providers (e.g. with the Ordnance Survey on greenspace data - S9c) to make available town-based data and helps town managers analyse the nature of their towns and thus strategic policy, direction and investment decisions. Since launch, Understanding Scottish Places has been visited by over 40,000 individual users. North Ayrshire Council’s use of USP and its Town Audits function won the Planning category award at the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning 2017 (S9a). The pioneering success of Understanding Scottish Places brought replication in Wales as [Understanding Welsh Places](#), with Sparks being involved as an adviser in its development. As Jen Wallace, Head of Policy of Carnegie UK Trust testifies, the research and leadership of Sparks have been essential in this:

“Understanding Scottish Places was a collaboration brought together by Carnegie UK Trust involving the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), Scotland’s Towns Partnership, the Scottish Government and the University of Stirling. Leigh Sparks (and his research) was critical to the rigour and coherence of the approach to, and the data at, the heart of the project. This has opened up new data sources on towns in Scotland, underpinning strategies and policies for places. The success of USP led directly to an equivalent being developed and used in Wales (Understanding Welsh Places, launched in 2019), with Leigh Sparks providing research-informed advice as this was developed for the particular Welsh circumstances and data.” (S9b)

COVID-response

The role of towns, place and communities became increasingly significant in the COVID-19 pandemic response. Given his research and expertise Sparks was appointed a member of the Scottish Government’s [Social Renewal Advisory Board](#) by Cabinet Secretaries Campbell (Communities and Local Government) and Somerville (Social Security and Older People), to input on towns and place (in Scotland Cabinet Secretaries are the Senior Government Ministers). Campbell also appointed Sparks to Chair the [Review of the Town Centre Action Plan](#) to ensure town centres are fit for the post-pandemic and climate emergency affected world. [The Review was published on the 3rd February 2021](#) and Sparks has been asked to present its findings to the UK, Welsh, and Irish governments. STP was asked by Government to lead on the GBP1,000,000 [Scotland Loves Local](#) campaign (summer 2020) to encourage spending in local towns, generating substantial national coverage with over 2,360,000 of Scotland’s population viewing campaign content. STP also led on the BIDs Recovery Fund (GBP1,000,000) and the Towns and BIDs Resilience Recovery Fund (GBP2,000,000) for the Government. The Minister for Business, Fair

Work and Skills (Hepburn) appointed Sparks to his [Retail Strategy Steering Group](#) in December 2020 (“this will examine retail through a place-based approach to policy making”).

Summary

Tangible and significant benefits to Scotland’s towns have resulted from Sparks’ work. As Neil McInroy (Chief Executive, Centre for Local Economic Strategies) states, “Across the body of work and activity where I have interacted with Professor Sparks (notably the National Review, Scotland’s Towns Partnership and Understanding Scottish Places), I know he has made a significant and enduring contributions to the local economic health and vibrancy of place” (S1). Aileen Campbell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government testifies that the research and leadership of Sparks have been essential throughout the development and implementation of Government policy and in its impact in reversing the decline of Scotland’s town centres:

“The Town Centre Action Plan has led the way internationally in thinking about towns, and much of this has been implemented through the work of Scotland’s Towns Partnership (STP) on behalf of the Scottish Government. The success and theoretical foundation of the Town Centre Action Plan is due in no small part to the research and leadership of Professor Sparks over a sustained period of time. Towns and town centres are vital for Scotland’s society and economy and Professor Sparks’ impact on actions to improve towns in Scotland has been considerable. When, in 2020 given Covid, we needed someone to lead the development of a new vision for Scotland’s towns, building on this strong legacy, I had no hesitation in appointing Professor Sparks to the task. His research and thinking on towns and place also encouraged me to appoint him to the Social Renewal Advisory Board to help ensure social renewal and place are aligned.” (S10)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. Testimonial from Neil McInroy, Chief Executive, Centre for Local Economic Strategies.

S2. Testimonial from David Cowan, Head of Regeneration for the Scottish Government.

S3. a. Scottish Government website, ‘Regeneration’ (2021). <http://stir.ac.uk/550>

b. Scottish Government (2016) Town Centre Action Plan: year two progress report. <http://stir.ac.uk/559>

S4. a. Aberdeenshire evidence document of webpages/documents showing impact.

b. Falkirk evidence document of webpages/document showing impact.

S5. The Programme for Government 2020-2021 announced GBP275,000,000 to support community-led regeneration and town-centre revitalisation <http://stir.ac.uk/5ar> with a further GBP55,000,000 announced in February 2021 to support town centres and community led regeneration projects <http://stir.ac.uk/5au>

S6. a. Testimonial from Douglas Reid, Leader of East Ayrshire Council.

b. Agenda and minutes of the Cross Party Group on Towns and Town Centres showing Sparks’ and STP’s involvement. <http://stir.ac.uk/553>

c. Testimonial from Phil Prentice, Chief Officer of Scotland’s Towns Partnership (STP).

d. The Herald supplements are available at <http://stir.ac.uk/556>

S7. a. ‘The Grimsey Report 2’ (2018) <http://stir.ac.uk/55c> p.25 illustrates STP impact in section “Leadership with collaboration – Scotland leads the way”. This is the follow up to highly influential Grimsey Report, an independent counterpoint to the Portas report in England.

b. The UK High Street Report, chaired by Sir John Timpson (<http://stir.ac.uk/5ax>), p.5 notes how impressed they are with “the work already done by Scotland’s Town Partnership”.

c. Testimonial from Bill Grimsey, ex-CEO of leading retailers and leading towns policy agitator

S8. Davison Porter, I., Lawlor, D., McInroy, N., Parker, C., Prentice, P., Sparks, L. and Warnaby, G. (2017), ‘The World Towns Framework: a call to action’, *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 10 No. 5, pp. 504-520. [DOI: 10.1108/JPM-10-2017-0101](https://doi.org/10.1108/JPM-10-2017-0101)

S9. a. Details of USP development and Stirling’s role: Findlay A, Jackson M, McInroy N, Prentice P, Robertson E and L Sparks (2018) ‘Putting Towns on the Policy Map: Understanding Scottish Places (USP)’, *Scottish Affairs*, 27/3, 294-318. [DOI: 10.3366/scot.2018.0245](https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2018.0245) (North Ayrshire Planning Award described at pp. 313-4)

b. Testimonial from Jen Wallace, Head of Policy of Carnegie UK Trust.

S10. Testimonial from Aileen Campbell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government