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## **The World Towns Framework: A Call to Action**

**Diarmaid Lawlor, Neil McInroy, Cathy Parker, Phil Prentice, Leigh Sparks & Gary Warnaby**

### **Introduction**

In June 2016 Scotland hosted the inaugural World Towns Leadership Summit. This was the first gathering of practitioners and thought leaders on a global scale, focusing on what needs to be done to secure the future of our towns. It agreed on an international framework to achieve this goal. This paper outlines the Summit's context, reproduces the resulting framework document, and indicates how academic research informs its content. The paper concludes by articulating the next steps in this ongoing process, issuing a "call to action" to individuals and organisations to use and to contribute to the future development of the World Towns Framework (see [http://www.scotlandstowns.org/a\\_world\\_towns\\_agreement](http://www.scotlandstowns.org/a_world_towns_agreement))

### **The development of the World Towns Summit**

In the aftermath of the global economic slowdown of 2007-8, many places felt significant adverse impacts. The 'great recession' heightened awareness of - and provided an impetus to tackle - the changing nature of place and towns in our economic, social and cultural lives. In the specific context of Scotland, the 'journey' which began with the National Review is laid out in Findlay and Sparks (2013, 2016), this resulted in 2012 with a National Review of Town Centres. The Review sought to answer fundamental questions about what towns are for, and how we think about, and care about, place in a more holistic way. In many ways, this made Scotland's capital city of Edinburgh a logical choice of venue to host the Summit.

In July 2013, the National Review's Expert Advisory Group's report articulated an underlying rationale for investing in, and re-energising towns, to that all sectors of Scotland's population could enjoy consequent social and economic benefits. Under an overarching 'Town Centre First' principle, the Review lined up six core themes to be pursued; namely, town centre living, digital towns, proactive planning, accessible services, local economic growth, and creative and entrepreneurial places. A particular emphasis was placed on integrating these themes and aligning them in such a way as to set up a blueprint for action.

This led to the Scottish Government's Town Centre Action Plan. This incorporated:

- a public commitment to implement the 'Town Centre First' principle, not only for retail but for public and other private investment where possible;
- aligning internal government departments and actions in support of the Town Centre Action Plan;
- funding various demonstration projects to work out what could best deliver change against the Action Plan's themes;
- providing funding to Scotland's Towns Partnership (STP) to promote STP as the 'go-to' body for towns in Scotland; and
- establishing a Cross Party Group (CPG) on Towns and Town Centres, which provided a Parliamentary forum to debate progress and activities following the Town Centre Action Plan.

One of the key tenets of the Action Plan was that there is no easy top-down solution to the issues that towns face. This arose from the fact that towns are individual parts of very complex ecosystems that are manifest at a variety of spatial scales, characterised by a complex web of inter-relationships. Indeed, each place is distinct, if not unique. Thus, every town needs to understand its particular situation, assets and opportunities, and there needs to be local community ownership of the issues and possible solutions. A number of the mechanisms to facilitate achieving place-based solutions pre-dated this initiative, but the Action Plan provided a stimulus to action to improve the position of Scotland's towns and town centres.

Of course, the issues faced are not unique to Scotland. Many other places face similar economic, social and technological issues, and concomitant challenges. Scotland, however, is distinct in having a coherent, aligned and formally recognised national plan for how to attempt to reverse the situation, placing community at the heart of the process. The contrast with other countries within the UK is stark. (Findlay & Sparks, 2013, 2014a). There remains much to be done, but hosting the World Towns Summit was a recognition that the first steps

have been made, might potentially provide lessons for others, and might in turn provide added stimulus and ideas for Scotland.

The specific origins of the Summit grew from conversations between representatives of the International Downtown Association, BIDS Scotland, the Association of Town and City Management and Scotland's Towns Partnership; all of whom saw similar issues relating to leadership, partnership, and change in the wider environment in the context of smaller *towns*, as opposed to bigger cities. There was, thus, an opportunity to "internationalise" the conversation about responses to the challenges faced. The situation in the context of towns in particular, was summed up in 'World Towns Framework: Developing the Framework' by Diarmaid Lawlor, Director of Urbanism for Architecture and Design Scotland, as follows:

"Towns are a key element of global urban infrastructure, and at the scale of nations, they are nodes of labour force, distinct local production and tourism. Towns, while distinct from entire cities, share many traits with urban neighbourhoods outside the city centre. Across regions, networks of towns connect people and infrastructure at scale. Towns and neighbourhoods matter to the transformation of modern economies, promising value; blending local and global opportunities. But, the town narrative is less well articulated than cities. Towns suffer. Transformation is stalled. The promise of a networked urban system, with choices, to support an increasingly diverse society is not met with the support and investment to deliver the reality. Towns are dealing with social migration at a scale previously even unknown to cities; the supporting infrastructure is not there and the response has been chaotic. Amongst the challenge lies opportunity. Across the world, towns and neighbourhoods are in this struggle. They are the largest scale for community, and the smallest scale for urbanity."

This highlights the importance of the economic and social roles of towns. For a country such as Scotland, notwithstanding the fact that it has two European scale cities in Glasgow and Edinburgh, 69% of the population live in towns and villages or on islands; so in essence

Scotland is a nation of towns. Thus, as outlined above, there was a recognition that what happens in these towns will ultimately determine Scotland's economic and social development. Consequently, towns should be – and were - a focus of policy and action. This led to the World Towns Leadership Summit considering this from a broader, international perspective.

### **The World Towns Framework: A Public-Private-Social Vision for Towns and Urban Centres**

Attempting to draw all these issues together, a major outcome from the Summit was the international co-production of a *World Towns Framework: A Public-Private-Social Vision for Towns and Urban Centres*. The purpose of the Framework is:

- to articulate the narrative of towns, neighbourhoods and city districts in responding to contemporary urban challenges;
- shape a new urban agenda for these urban places; and
- assert the need for new alliances and approaches essential for a strong competitive economy combined with a fairer, more equal society.

The World's Towns Framework was originally drafted and then amended during the conference by Neil McInroy, Chief Executive of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and Diamaid Lawlor, Head of Urbanism at Architecture and Design Scotland. Originally positioned as an 'agreement', feedback suggested that a 'framework' was a more appropriate label – as delegates were concerned that an agreement may restrict some place protagonists benefitting from the guidance. For example, an informal place partnership may not have the legal authority to 'sign' an agreement, but could easily adopt a framework as a mechanism to guide action. It was thus felt to be more inclusive.

The Framework was based upon four interconnected principles:

- The unique sense of identity and place;
- Economy;
- Leadership and Citizenship;

- Environment.

These are outlined further in the full text of the Framework, below:

### **MISSION STATEMENT**

*We, the delegates and online participants at the World Towns Leadership Summit, support a renewed global emphasis on towns and urban districts. This is required as a means of responding effectively to a rapidly changing economic, social, and environmental context.*

*Today the world is faced with unprecedented challenges and opportunities. By 2030 two thirds of the world population will live in urban areas, while by 2050 15% of the world population will be over 65. These changes place new pressures on public services; social migration is happening at a scale previously unknown; and people and communities are now living with the impacts of climate change. Meanwhile, city infrastructure will struggle to cope with projected trends of urbanisation. All of this is taking place in an era of technological, communicational and social transformation.*

*Delivering a new emphasis on the role of towns and urban districts requires, strategic support, and investment. We also need more civic engagement— after all, what are places, without people. This Framework sets out our shared principles for collaboration, to take action to strengthen the town and urban district narrative globally. This new approach can deliver economic, environmental and community focused solutions.*

*A key part of this narrative is to recognise that towns, whilst different from cities, can also be distinct districts within cities. Further, towns - whilst increasingly drawn into the orbit of cities - can also offer unique and different aspects to urban life. Towns and urban districts matter, offering distinct elements of urban life at a scale which is often rich in local identity and deep in terms of social interaction, and developing a local sense of place within a globalised society. Towns and urban districts should be seen as the largest scale for community, and the smallest scale for urbanity.*

*However, this distinctive narrative is undervalued. All too often our towns and urban districts:*

- *are subsumed into wider city or regional planning, reducing the potential to advance town-sensitive solutions and opportunities;*
- *have local economies which are dominated by the wider city economy, weakening local economic energy and activity;*
- *are often remote from decision making, as they are governed at a scale which sometimes fails to serve the needs, wants and desires of local citizens.*

### **PRINCIPLES**

*This Framework has been created through an open engagement with communities and stakeholder organisations in the public, private and third sectors across the world, and*

through participative debate at The World Towns Leadership Summit in Edinburgh, 15-16 June 2016.

On June 16, 2016, we the organising partners and delegates to the World Towns Leadership Summit agreed to support the following four key principles to strengthen the articulation of the towns and urban districts narrative.

### **Principle 1: The Unique Identities of Place**

#### 1.1 Uniqueness of Place

We shall support the unique characteristics of each town and urban district, the 'DNA of place', to engage communities, businesses and institutions in driving forward their future, and to address the plural and distinctive set of challenges facing these unique places.

#### 1.2 Place Plans

Recognising the specific characteristics of each place, we should draw up a **unique vision for that place**, drawing upon learning from around the world.

#### 1.3 Plurality and Participation

We recognise that towns and urban districts are rapidly changing. Drawing on the insights of new citizens, cultures, businesses and institutions we must build the capacity to deal with rapid change whilst avoiding any negative impact on the character of the place. We recognise the importance of a **plurality of views** and social bridging as a key aspect of town resilience.

#### 1.4 Multiple Pathways

We recognise that there are **multiple pathways to future success**. We accept that different towns and urban districts will adopt different strategies based on triggers for action, forms of leadership, and cultural values. We recognise that doing the 'same as usual' will not work.

### **Principle 2: Local Economies**

#### 2.1 Support local economic development.

We recognise that local business ownership, is central to ensuring resilient growth and place success. We must seek to enhance and develop local independent economic activity.

#### 2.2. Local Data

We recognise that the scale of towns and urban districts facilitates people meeting each other, sharing information, opportunities and insights. **Driving effective change needs rich local data** – conversational, experiential, quantitative – and local ways to harvest that data.

#### 2.3 Open Sharing of Knowledge

We believe that knowledge should be owned by the many, not the few. Great towns thrive on shared knowledge and connections, within the town and between networks of towns.

*Towns and urban districts should find their own place in the networked economy. We need a knowledge architecture with open systems.*

#### **2.4 Sustainability**

*A sustainable local economy means less travel miles, promoting the use of local businesses, and keeping resources in the area etc. Circular economy opportunities in local areas are also worth embracing – where waste product being produced locally could be used as a raw material by someone else nearby, for example. Such ideas are gaining momentum worldwide.*

#### **2.5 Smart Specialisation**

*We recognise the opportunity of differentiation of towns and urban districts within networks, maximising comparative advantages. Focusing on the assets and strengths of a place, we must build an economy of smart specialisation around towns and regions.*

### **Principle 3: Governance and Citizenship**

#### **3.1 Great Relationships with Blurred Boundaries**

*We recognise that **great towns and urban districts have great economic and social relationships**. These relationships foster collaboration, based on shared outcomes. Successful places will embrace the blurring, bridging and fusion of the traditional boundaries between public, commercial, and community sectors.*

#### **3.2 Hubs to Integrate New Cultures and Citizens**

*We recognise the value of, and need for our towns and urban districts to welcome new cultures and forms of citizenship. We must build and plan towns which connect, rather than separate citizens. Community engagement is a key element of all schemes and is a powerful tool to raise awareness in communities about the value of cultural diversity.*

#### **3.3 Modern Governance Structures**

*We need inclusive, transparent and open structures that engage citizens and direct the future of towns and urban districts. This must support city regional level of governance, but it cannot be allowed to dominate local identities.*

#### **3.4 Leadership**

*We recognise that traditionally leadership has been about leading from the front. **We must reduce reliance on traditional top-down initiatives**, with the web and digital technologies increasing opportunities to engage, collaborate and co-create.*

### **Principle 4: Environments**

#### **4.1 Reducing the Environmental Footprint**

*We recognise **the value of environmental resources, and the responsibility for stewardship**, to enhance towns and urban districts and support future generations. We agree to reduce the environmental footprint of towns and urban districts, and manage their impact on scarce resources. In addition, there is economic benefit that can be*



*achieved by being more considerate around resource use. Sustainability is key to maintaining an ideal local area.*

#### 4.2 Nurture Assets

*We must **respect and nurture all assets**, including environmental, cultural, built, economic, social, human and technological.*

#### 4.3 Quality of experience

*We recognise that the trajectory of each town and urban district is different. There are different types of place, with different functions. We will support the **enhancement quality of experience** for people in each type of town and urban district, informing strategies around the blend of services, amenities and design quality.*

#### 4.4 Adaptation to Climate Change

*We recognise that climate change is already impacting on our towns and urban districts. Different towns are affected by the changing climate in different ways, but no one place can adapt on its own. To meet these challenges will require open cooperation and collaboration between urban areas. We **agree to build partnerships to take collective action to make our towns more resilient to climate change**, protecting citizens from the risks it poses and making the most of opportunities it may present.*

#### 4.5 The Social Value of Place

*Public places are often the platform of social structures and are charged with shared values and collective memories. **The value of public places for communities needs to be seen as a distinct asset**. New places should be planned in a way that hosts future local routines, creates collective memories, nurtures shared values and caters for both people's need for quietness and social interaction.*

### **A Research Informed Commentary on the Framework**

If a document such as the *World Towns Framework* is to optimise its effect in terms of informing and influencing policy makers into action, then it should be more than a mere desiderata. It should ideally be evidence-based in order to facilitate the task of those responsible for the management of our towns in obtaining resource and other commitment to actually enable the achievement of the four principles outlined above. Here, we consider each of the four overarching principles of the *World Towns Framework* and how they are underpinned by evidence, from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and Architecture and Design Scotland (the organisations that supported the drafting of the framework), and also academics affiliated to the Institute of Place Management, based at Manchester Metropolitan University, and to the Institute for Retail Studies at the University of Stirling. Whilst we have structured this around the four principles of the Framework, two aspects

should be highlighted: (1) that these principles are inevitably interconnected, and that any discussion of them (and the implications arising for towns) should recognise that the issues emerging from these principles in the context of particular places are integrated to a greater or lesser degree; and (2) that the evidence we present to underpin the framework is confined to work that has been undertaken within the Institute of Place Management, the Institute for Retail Studies, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and Architecture and Design Scotland. Whilst we acknowledge that there is a much wider evidence base to be found within the literature, one purpose of this article is to actively support and promote the World Towns Framework. Therefore, by relying on our own evidence we are confident that we are not misinterpreting or misappropriating evidence from elsewhere in support of the Framework.

#### Overarching principle 1: The unique identity of place

Places are complex and, in many ways, kaleidoscopic entities, with a multitude of different facets, depending on the perspective from which they are observed. Indeed, each place is unique: a result of features such as morphology and topography, built environment, population, history, economic and social activities, etc. (Warnaby, 2009). Consequently it can be argued that each place needs to be regarded in terms of being its own ecosystem with varying degrees of vulnerability and/or resilience, influenced by exogenous economic (including retail) and social changes (Findlay & Sparks, 2012). Of particular importance is the role of public space which “can serve as a useful, local, everyday resource; as a focus for community involvement and can assist in generating a localised sense of belonging” (McDonald, 2011; p.14).

Communicating this place specificity to foster place attachment and differentiate (or even delineate) a locale is a crucial aspect of place management, and also place marketing/branding activities (Kalandides, 2011; Skinner, 2011; Warnaby & Medway, 2013). The nature of the urban place ‘product’ being managed and marketed can be changed (Parker, Ntounis, Quin & Millington, 2016), with input from numerous place stakeholders (Le Feuvre, Medway, Warnaby, Ward & Goatman, 2016), thereby incorporating a plurality of perspectives (Warnaby & Medway 2013). Indeed, the place ‘product’ is, arguably, ‘co-created’ by all those individuals, groups and institutions located therein (Warnaby & Medway, 2013, 2015), and appropriate processes need to be put in place to facilitate this (Stubbs & Warnaby,

2015). Important activities include the development of a vision for the place (Warnaby, Bennison, Davies & Hughes, 2002), derived from as many stakeholders as possible. However, the inherent complexity of places, as noted above, will lead to alternative voices articulating their particular points of view and creating competing narratives of the place (Henshaw, Medway, Warnaby & Perkins, 2016; Koeck & Warnaby, 2015). Thus, we need to recognise that **there is always more than one way to enable the creation of a vibrant and successful place** and that as everyone has their own personal perception of a place we should amend this overarching principle to read **the unique identities of place** to ensure we do not fall into the trap of thinking place identity is fixed, objective and never contested (Kalandides, 2011). Likewise, it is important to appreciate that homogenous communities do not exist, therefore, those trying to affect change in locations should always be explicit about exactly who is likely to benefit (Kalandides, Millington, Parker & Quin, 2016).

### Overarching principle 2: Local economies

Each urban place will incorporate its own blend of land uses and activities, which require effective management if economic and social benefits are to be achieved. In their pursuit of local economic development, individual places need to focus on managing and promoting those assets that constitute strengths and possible opportunities into the future, enabling the place to perform potentially numerous roles (Findlay & Sparks, 2012). The 'balance' between the different functions of a place is important because "(w)here local economies are too dependent on either the public, commercial or social aspects of their economy, place resilience can be vulnerable and brittle, and areas may fail to take advantage of opportunities" (McInroy & Longlands, 2010; p.5).

A local economy is a complex organism with multiple dimensions and interactions. These incorporate - but are not restricted to - the economy of the High Street (Sparks, 1998), which is arguably, where the most visible manifestations of decline are made manifest. One of the failings of policy in this area is that they address symptoms, such as empty shops, rather than the root cause(s) which may vary from place to place (Findlay & Sparks, 2009) and tend to focus on ground level rather than the mixed uses afforded in the part of upper floors. Local economies, therefore, have to be understood at the local and network level (Findlay & Sparks,

2008), across all sectors and accommodating all relevant conditions if any interventions are to be effective.

A prime focus of the work of the Institute of Place Management and the Institute for Retail Studies has been on retailing, given the importance of this activity to many local urban economies (Bennison, Warnaby & Pal, 2010). Thus, managing and promoting urban retail is a significant element of place management in many towns (Warnaby et al., 2002; Warnaby, Bennison & Davies, 2005a, 2005b). Given the ubiquity of the multiple retailer, the development of *differentiated* retail activities specific and hopefully unique to a particular urban place, such as local markets (Hallsworth, Ntounis, Parker & Quin, 2015; Warnaby, 2013), and linked to this, a focus on the experiential aspects of urban retail destinations (Oakes & Warnaby, 2011; Warnaby, 2009) offer opportunities for developing “beneficial place outcomes, such as increased resilience, better social justice or more economic growth” (McInroy & Longlands, 2010, p.4). In addition, the role of specific neighbourhoods in creating place distinctiveness should not be ignored (Bennison, Warnaby & Medway, 2007; Kalandides & Vaiou, 2012). Here, retailing could play an important role in binding together residents within a locale (Findlay & Sparks, 2014b), thereby facilitating community cohesion through, for example, community shops (Calderwood & Davies, 2006, 2013). The trading profiles of the shops constituting such community-oriented retail activity would demonstrate diverse operating and trading profiles, consistent with meeting *local* needs (Calderwood & Davies, 2012). However, notwithstanding the importance of retail activities, the health of local economies is dependent on more than merely the shopping behaviour of the populace.

If successful local economies are to be created – and importantly, maintained - then the importance of developing knowledge, insights and information across all relevant stakeholders (an issue considered in more detail in Overarching Principle 3) is an important facilitating factor (Parker et al, 2016). Nevertheless, economic ‘success’ will be affected by a multitude of factors, the majority of which are outside of a location’s control (Parker et al., 2016). Therefore, local economies should be understood in comparative terms. To achieve this overarching principle, **local leaders need to become much more adept in gathering and interpreting data and using data to make much more locally-relevant (but globally astute) economic decisions** (Millington, Ntounis, Parker & Quin, 2015).

One of the aims of the Understanding Scottish Towns initiative (developed by CLES, STP, University of Stirling, Carnegie UK Trust and the Scottish Government - see [www.usp.scot](http://www.usp.scot)) is to address a pressing need for consistent, comparable and better quality data to inform important decisions about how communities are organised, funded and inter-related. It provides an online tool to help understand the facts, figures and interrelationships that underpin all 479 of Scotland's towns. New economic opportunities can arise through understanding these interrelationships more effectively. For example when the Forth Road Bridge was shut for emergency repairs it was estimated that Fife towns benefitted from clawing back the annual 'leak' of 1 billion pounds to Edinburgh. With more home working more money can be circulated in the local economy – as well as bringing environmental and wellbeing benefits, as people commute less. Other tools such as The Place Standard (<http://placestandard.scot/#/home>) help communities structure conversations about place, and can help consider all the elements of a place in a more methodical way.

### Overarching principle 3: Governance and citizenship

The multiplicity of potential urban stakeholders has been acknowledged above. The existence of strong structures and networks for the effective management and marketing of places is imperative (Coca-Stefaniak, Parker, Quin & Rinaldi, 2009; Warnaby, Alexander & Medway, 1998), including processes for performance measurement (Hogg, Medway & Warnaby, 2004, 2007). In conceptual terms, Parker (2011) suggests that the development of research into place management started with understanding the role of town centres and town centre management schemes. From the mid 1990's, she suggests that researchers began to investigate other models of place management, such as BIDs and their operational role in place maintenance. This was followed by a 'third wave' of place management research, with a more overt focus on the strategic and partnership aspects of place management, encompassing place making, place marketing and place maintenance). This more holistic 'place management' approach incorporates issues relating to the partnership modus operandi and identifying the stakeholders (and their interactions) within resulting networks. There are now a number of different place management structures representing different

modes of governance. Business Improvement Districts, forms of public-private partnership, have grown in popularity (Donaghy, Findlay & Sparks, 2013) and have often replaced public-sector led approaches to town centre management. Other approaches, for example Development Trusts and Community Enterprises, can be (and often are in Scotland) used as alternative legal structures to manage development “where there is clear community support and a sustainable proposition, community asset ownership can indeed act as a catalyst for community-led regeneration.” (Linda Gillespie, Development Trusts Association, as quoted in Architecture and Design Scotland, 2015). There is a multiplicity of tools for good place governance; many now lie outside of the traditional public or private continuum (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2009).

Place management networks can exist at varying spatial scales, from local initiatives of varying degrees of formality (such as town centre management schemes - see Warnaby et al., 1998) to national networks and regulatory regimes – such as, for example, the land use planning system, which can have a major impact on individual locales (see Smith & Sparks, 2001). Recent years have seen a shift in governance towards wider city-regions that might incorporate numerous towns, but their ‘strings attached’ ‘city deals’ which prescribe forms of governance (McInroy et al., 2016) could arguably lead to some erosion of the freedom of action of individual towns/district centres.

Actor interaction within place management networks can be both formal and informal, and can be ongoing, or more *ad hoc* as circumstances (as specific management/marketing initiatives) dictate - see Warnaby et al., (2002, 2005a). Within these networks, effective working between public, private and voluntary sector actors is important (Le Feuvre et al., 2016). Unfortunately, some sectors, particularly the voluntary/community sector are often overlooked: “(a) coherent, evidence-based, understanding of what a thriving place needs and the contribution the sector needs to make to that place remains largely undeveloped and is rarely linked to local economic strategic thinking” (CLES and VSNW, 2014; p.11).

The inclusivity and openness of place management and governance networks is critical to their success, with relevant stakeholders contributing appropriately (Medway, Alexander,

Bennison & Warnaby, 1999; Medway, Warnaby, Bennison & Alexander 2000), and avoiding the problem of free-riding (Forsberg, Medway & Warnaby, 1999). However, to achieve this guiding principle, **stakeholders will require training, education, guidance and support to be able to participate in good governance and citizenship as effectively as possible** (Byrom, Parker & Harris, 2002; Hudson-Davies & Parker, 2002; Parker & Anthony-Winter, 2003).

#### Overarching principle 4: Environments

Concern for the environment has grown in recent years as evidence of climate change and the contribution of human behaviour to the crisis is accepted (CLES, 2016). Many individual locations, even small towns or villages, have been at the forefront of locally tackling these global problems. For instance, Incredible Edible Todmorden has shortened food supply chains by using the town centre to grow fruit and vegetables (Paull, 2011, Warhurst & Dobson, 2014). Ashton Hayes in Cheshire aims to become the first carbon neutral village and, since 2006, has already cut their carbon dioxide emissions by 23% (goingcarbonneutral.co.uk, 2016). The Ayrshire mining community of Cumnock is to become Scotland's first 'Green Town' in an ambitious plan involving major corporate and community partnership.

All macro-environmental issues, no matter how abstract or global, come to ground locally. CLES have developed guidance for how individual towns and cities become greener (CLES, 2016). This guidance starts with a call to "recognise the environment as our most important asset" (p.1), thereby explicitly stating the importance of the local natural environment. However, the urban environment within which management initiatives operate is an important factor influencing their efficacy (Parker et al., 2016). For example, the quality of the urban built environment is important in retail success (De Nisco & Warnaby, 2013, 2014) and place differentiation (Warnaby, 2009). As noted above towns exist in a competitive context as they compete for public funds, economic activity and tourists etc. However, the environment *within* a specific place influences perceptions of its economic and social vitality (see Medway, Parker & Roper, 2016; Parker, Roper & Medway, 2015; Roper & Parker, 2013, with specific reference to litter). For many people 'the environment' is very local and physical – it is the availability of greenspace or the quality and cleanliness of public space – which is intrinsically linked to people's perceptions of crime and safety and their wellbeing (Medway, Parker & Roper, 2016). Therefore, this overarching principle is an opportunity for towns to

make environmental improvements at many spatial scales. From tackling global issues to a **focus on 'ordinary placemaking'** (Millington & Kyte, 2016) which can impact on the everyday lived experiences of millions of people who live in, work in or visit our towns (Edensor & Millington, in press): "Even if I don't use the park, seeing it everyday is good" (Participant feedback, quoted in Architecture and Design Scotland, 2015). The physical however also impacts the mental state and health of residents and interactions between them are critical for social wellbeing. The growth of the 'living lab' concept is testament to how universities, data providers, technologists and communities are working together to improve both the macro environment (e.g. reducing carbon dioxide emissions) and the everyday experience in specific towns and in physical and emotional senses.

Broader social and economic conditions influence the nature of locales (and their economies), with implications for the well-being of citizens. A specific example of this, which has been the subject of extensive research, is the impact of neighbourhood deprivation on the price and availability of fresh vegetables (Cummins, Findlay, Petticrew & Sparks, 2005; Cummins, Findlay, Higgins, Petticrew, Sparks & Thomson, 2008; Cummins, Smith, Aitken, Dawson, Marshall, Sparks & Anderson, 2010; Dawson, Marshall, Taylor, Cummins, Sparks & Anderson, 2008). Such issues are also affected by the extent of relative rurality/urbanity (Smith, Cummins, Taylor, Dawson, Marshall, Sparks & Anderson, 2010; Cummins, Smith, Taylor, Dawson, Marshall, Sparks & Anderson, 2009), as well as the impact of living in island communities (see Calderwood & Freathy 2011, 2014).

### **Reflection and next steps**

The World Towns Framework was well received by the delegates at the World Towns Summit. However, this paper demonstrates that as well as having popular support, the principles contained within it are underpinned by a rich and thorough academic evidence base, generated by researchers from key institutions affiliated to the World Towns Summit.

As well as allowing existing evidence to be integrated into the framework, this process has also allowed us to interrogate the principles and make some suggestions to improve the World Town's Framework. First, we feel the framework should not be prescriptive as **'there is always more than one way to enable the creation of a vibrant and successful place'**.



Likewise, there are a multitude of identities associated with any particular place, so identity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder but also the creators. Our first suggestion would be to amend the first overarching principle to ‘the unique identities of place’.

Our second suggestion refers to the data and decision-making prowess needed to (and often failed) actively support local economies, rather than merely unquestionably reproduce standard economic development policies. We suggest **leaders need to become much more adept in gathering and interpreting data and using data to make much more locally-relevant (but globally astute) economic decisions**. Capacity to do this at all levels of place needs to be built. Therefore, we make reference to this later in our call to action.

Third, the complex and changing nature of the governance landscape also means people need a helping hand – they cannot be expected to just know how to participate to best effect. Therefore, we suggest **training, education, guidance and support to be able to participate in good governance and citizenship as effectively as possible will be required across all communities**. Again, we refer to training and development in our call to action, at the end of this section.

Finally, despite the very important complex and global challenges the World Towns Framework addresses, such as those contained within the economy and the environment, it is important to remember that many small-scale and local initiatives and interventions can make a real difference. The World Towns Framework is **an opportunity to focus on ‘ordinary placemaking’**. Whilst the hype might be around the competitive city, the smart, the global etc., we need to focus on the towns, their interconnectivity, both old and new technologies, and the goal of achieving noticeable local, inclusive change through a succession of small-steps *together*.

We now move to set out the next steps we feel will help the adoption of the framework and, ultimately, result in towns which are “more successful, more liveable and more equitable” (Kalandides, Millington, Parker & Quin, 2016, p.358). These steps will include:

1. Internationalize the conversation and refine the framework

The World Towns Summit ended with a draft framework – and now the framework needs to be more widely shared and improved. We see the World Towns’ Framework akin to open source software, where the users are free to use, apply, adapt and improve it. It is important to state, upfront, that the World Towns Framework will always be freely available to anyone. Scotland’s Towns Partnership have developed a method to get wider input and identify a suitable collaborative process for publishing an enhanced version of the Framework, at the next World Towns Summit in Scotland in 2018.

This includes the publication of this paper and the revised World Towns Framework, as well as managing quarterly meetings between ‘The Collective’ i.e. key participants from Scottish Towns Partnership, International Downtown Association, Association of Town and City Management and Scottish BIDS, who will work closely with the Scottish Government, Architecture and Design Scotland, the Institute of Place Management, Carnegie UK and Centre for Local Economic Strategies to curate the development of the Framework. This work will be informed by an international grouping of leading urbanists, academics and leaders. To ensure transparency in the process by which the Framework is adapted, we will publish regular updates and progress papers and circulate these to all the people and organisations that collaborate in the refinement.

## 2. Test the concept and share the findings

Whilst we have faith in the four pillars that make up the World Towns Framework, it is important that we also develop a sound, practical evidence base to underpin it. In a similar way in which this paper has grounded the pillars in an academic knowledge base we now need to show that a focus upon unique identities, local economies and communities, government and citizenship and environment will make a difference *in practice*. The Collective will work with people in towns willing to pilot activity and approaches that are linked to the evolving framework. We commit to sharing experience, learning and to demonstrate best practice as it emerges. STP will develop a dissemination strategy on behalf of the Collective to facilitate the widespread adoption of worthwhile knowledge to ensure it can be transferred efficiently. This will include launching a dedicated web hosting for the World Towns Framework.

### 3. Embed the Framework in people and places

Whilst the Framework with its four pillars seems fairly simple, we know that many towns are struggling. In practice we know it is not easy to change the prognosis for many towns. Challenged with the problems of losing identity, resources, footfall, social cohesion and inclusion, economic impact and decision making powers it is easy to think that the issues are insurmountable. Being a place leader or champion in this context is exceptionally difficult. Therefore, we believe, the people that want to affect positive change in their towns need to be part of a strong and supportive network. In Scotland STP is developing a network of Scottish Leaders. We also believe that education and training can help improve knowledge and skills, thereby building capacity in places through people. Together, the University of Stirling and Manchester Metropolitan University will develop a set of standards, based upon the Framework, to embed the skills and knowledge necessary for the leaders of towns across the world into qualifications and training.

### 4. Support the Framework with data and resources

There is no doubt new technologies and developments such as big data and the Internet of Things are capable of transforming places. However, at the moment the focus is very much on application in the 'smart city' not the small town, despite the data and technology being readily available. We call for the wider use of modern technology and data at the level of towns to better harness our understandings of interactions, change and impacts. A part of the development of the Framework, research pilots will be initiated under each of the four WTF themes. Feedback on the progress of these pilots incorporated into future summits. This will help provide the necessary evidence-base to ensure policy and practice is strengthened in towns and supports the purpose of the Framework which is to:

- Articulate the narrative of towns, neighbourhoods and city districts in responding to contemporary urban challenges;
- Shape a new urban agenda for these urban places;
- Assert the need for new alliances and approaches essential for a strong competitive economy combined with a fairer, more equal society.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have set out to explain the context to the development of the World Towns Framework, explain the Framework itself, as well as embedding its overarching principles in an evidence base on which we are confident. This is just the beginning. We hope the Framework is now adopted by many of the places that attended the World Towns Leadership Summit in Edinburgh, not as a prescriptive 'panacea' for all ills, but more as a common language with which we can all share ideas, interventions and an honest assessment of what works (and what doesn't!). Of course, a lot of work needs to be done to support this and we have also set out some of the next steps we see necessary. Now we have published this – in a format that is open to everyone to access – our final call to action is on you – the reader – to contribute, to criticise, to adapt, adopt...to get involved. Any of the authors can help you get started. Quite simply, in the face of a dominant place narrative that prioritises the city, we need to make towns the talking point again.

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