

## Stirlingretail

*Comments on retail issues from Leigh Sparks, the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling*

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### Scotland's Towns Partnership: A (Covid) Year in Review

Posted on [May 27, 2021](#) by [Leigh Sparks](#)

Towards the end of each May, thoughts at [Scotland's Towns Partnership \(STP\)](#) often turn reflective. As we head towards our [Annual Towns Tea Party and our AGM \(2<sup>nd</sup> June\)](#), we look back on the year. This year has of course been a year like no other, so that reflection on what we have been doing is all the more vital.

STP works alongside the Scottish Government to create stronger, more sustainable, vibrant communities. STP is the trusted national body for Towns and [Improvement Districts](#), providing a single entity driving partnership, collaboration, progress and innovation across a diverse and complex environment. The Partnership provides expert brokerage between public, private, academia and social sector stakeholders.

A range of resources and services to stakeholders who work to improve and regenerate towns are available and these include resources and toolkits such as:

Understanding Scottish Places (USP), USP Your Town Audit, Town Centre Toolkit, Place Standard, STP Funding Finder, News & Resource Services.

and services such as:

STP learning events, Scotland's Towns Conference, Funding Consultancy, National Towns Campaigns, Competitions

Details of all of these can be found on the [website](#).

These resources and services remain important, but the last year has been mainly about Covid-19 activity and providing funding support to Scotland's towns and businesses. Over the year, supported and funded by the Scottish Government, Scotland's Towns Partnership and Improvement Districts Scotland have supported 357 place-based organisations with Covid-19 resilience and recovery funding. Over £3.6m was allocated across four funding streams:

- Covid-19 BID Resilience Fund (BRF),
- Towns and BIDs Resilience and Recovery Fund (TBRRF) (coordinated in two streams, for Towns and BIDs respectively) and,
- Scotland Loves Local Fund.

Every local authority area in Scotland received funding from at least one of these funds.

**The Covid-19 BID Resilience Fund (BRF)** was launched in April 2020. During that month, STP asked Local Authorities to pause collection of BID Levies for a minimum period of 6 months. Where a BID agreed a critical response role with Local Government, the BRF resourced this via a £1m COVID-19 BIDS Resilience Fund. The fund encouraged BIDs to deliver emergency support around mitigation of the pandemic locally and encouraged a role to support their council, agencies, levy payers and other businesses, neighbouring districts and towns, local communities, and charities. This funding directly secured at least 81 FTE jobs related to and enabling BIDs to support hundreds of businesses in their district areas.

**The Towns and BIDS Resilience and Recovery Fund (TBRRF)** towns stream was announced in July 2020 and was intended to support localised response activities contributing to town centre and high street resilience and recovery. Projects included PPE and public health infrastructure, 'open for business' directories, virtual high streets, 'Love Local' campaigns and managing public spaces in order to address immediate priorities as lockdown restrictions are gradually eased. The fund supported 189 towns across Scotland, substantially more than the 108 anticipated.

**A separate TBRRF funding stream of £700,000 for Business Improvement Districts** was opened for applications in September 2020. This funding facilitated BIDs and surrounding businesses with a range of initiatives to help local economies bounce back from the pandemic, including community resilience measures, e-commerce platforms, and schemes to ensure social distancing and hygiene measures are in place, in line with Scottish Government guidelines.

**[The Scotland Loves Local Fund](#)** was launched in October 2020 to improve and promote local place and communities through capital or revenue grants of between £500 and £5,000. Projects included small scale local improvements, including those contributing locally to net-zero targets and supporting localised responses in town and settlement centres, such as, 'Love Local' marketing campaigns, environmental/place improvement, digital trading infrastructure, safe trading facilities, town signage/maps and local marketplace initiatives. With 193 individual town applications and 35 awards to multi-town partnership projects, the fund supported 261 towns across Scotland.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic a key focus of STP's communications has been the Scotland Loves Local campaign. This has been led by STP and largely funded by Scottish Government augmented by support from a suite of strategic partners. The campaign is designed to encourage the public to 'think local first' and support their high streets safely and in line with public health guidelines. Since its launch the campaign has had huge public impact, coinciding with growing public support for local shops and services.

During the year of course, [the Review of the Town Centre Action Plan was also published as "A New Future for Scotland's Towns"](#). I was delighted to be asked to Chair it, and again [thank all those that were on the Review Group and all those who got involved through whatever mechanism](#). The hard work of turning the thoughts and recommendations into actions is beginning and will continue over the year. The ambition for our towns should be welcomed and if powerful change is implemented now, then they do have an excellent future. I won't reflect more on the Review here as it has been [covered in in this blog at some length](#), though I will return to its implementation as it progresses.

It has been some year for Scotland's towns and for Scotland's Towns Partnership, as well no doubt for all those involved as partners or others in this critically important place based agenda. Come along (virtually) to the Towns Tea Party and the AGM and let's celebrate and reflect on what has been achieved in the face of real adversity.

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**About Leigh Sparks**

I am Professor of Retail Studies at the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling, where I research and teach aspects of retailing and retail supply chains, alongside various colleagues. I am Chair of Scotland's Towns Partnership. I am also a Deputy Principal of the University, with responsibility for Education and Students.

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