

The beating heart of communities



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Business Comment

LATER this month the Scotland's Towns Conference being held in Stirling will focus on the importance of town centres. It was John

Swinney who, back in 2008, described Scotland's town centres as being "the beating heart of local communities".

To quote from the programme, "delegates will be offered UK and International examples of proven good practice and policy interventions designed to protect, grow and support towns".

One of the speakers will be journalist Lesley Riddoch, who will be talking under the banner to "Save our Towns", arguing that town centres are the focal point of every conurbation in the UK.

To prove this point, the City of Inverness has been assessed as generating £100m in tourism income out of a total £600m for the whole Highland area.

Purely by chance, as I was looking through the conference pack I received a copy of

an excellent Department for Business Innovation and Skills booklet offering a healthcheck for high streets and town centres.

For those of us involved in the management and development of town centres this booklet offers a concise analysis of the issues facing a city like Inverness — and more importantly focuses on the key factors integral to addressing them.

It stresses the need to differentiate between dealing with the short-term cyclical issues and the more structural changes in the way we work or shop.

Understanding the dynamics of the former allows retailers to shift to areas of trade relevant to today's business climate.

A good example locally in recent years has been Tulloch

Homes moving into providing low-cost housing alongside their private house sales business.

The latest monthly Scottish Retail Consortium newsletter tells us that in the clothing sector people are increasingly unwilling to buy unless they perceive value or have a real need, whereas ready meals and meal deals sold well as people have been staying in and treating themselves instead of going out to eat.

Fundamental structural change is much more difficult to recognise and accept. BIS says what is needed to address it is leadership, partnership and vision.

In decades past these qualities were brought by local merchants, who either had a moral commitment to the society they were part of or a vested interest in area being

successful. In recent years we have seen major change in the people and organisations providing this leadership, and if the government is successful in reducing the size of the public sector we will see an increased third sector involvement in all our lives.

The new BID chairman Craig Duncan referred to the volunteer director base of BID (now 15 strong) who, like himself, give their time freely for the benefit of the fellow traders.

As one who has recently holidayed in Lanzarote, where more than 25 politicians and business people have been arrested for corruption in the past two years, it is good to know that the spirit of business commitment to the community continues to thrive in Inverness to the benefit of our city.