

HOW CAN WE REVITALISE OUR TOWN AND CITY CENTRES?

In addition to their residential function, town and city centres have traditionally played a role as a hub for production, employment, commerce and services, to the benefit of their inhabitants and those of neighbouring municipalities. Maintaining this network is important for local balance and cohesion, quality of life and social bonds.

INSEE identifies 1666 “catchment areas”, smaller localities where the population has access to the most common services, 1644 of which are in mainland France and 22 in the overseas departments. A recent study by the Observatoire des Territoires identified 10,774 municipalities as centres for facilities and services, including 7,010 local centres for facilities and services, 2,880 intermediate centres, 742 development centres and 142 major centres.

However, many of our country’s town centres are experiencing forms of decline, including depopulation, housing and shop vacancies (partly linked to periurbanisation), dilapidated buildings, public service closures, difficulties in accessing care and services, and communal breakdown. This loss of vitality particularly affects the centres of many small towns and cities. Awareness of this phenomenon and its detrimental effects on sustainable development objectives has been growing since the mid-2010s.

Many factors contribute to this phenomenon: urban sprawl, periurbanisation and the loss of part of the city centre population to the outskirts; the decline in manufacturing, the expansion of

shopping areas to the outskirts and the rise of e-commerce, all of which lead to an increase in commercial vacancies in city centres, which are all the more pronounced the smaller the city; local and public service reforms that reduce the presence of these services in small cities.

Ageing makes it even more important for the population to have services and shops nearby. Surveys show that many households want to move to smaller cities or to the countryside. The Covid-19 lockdowns have heightened this aspiration. The rise of telework may heighten it further.

Focusing on the revitalisation of town and city centres with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, as well as on the resources to revitalise them, the ESEC’s opinion examines this concept of a “centre”, the components of urban decline and the recent factors that may shift the balance. It analyses the criteria that influence the attractiveness of small town and city centres, the contradictions and constraints, as well as the revitalisation policies implemented by the government, in particular the “Small Towns of Tomorrow” programme, which targets this objective.



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The opinion makes recommendations for progress in this direction, based on five main points.

POINT I: DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE PROJECT BASED ON A PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY ENGINEERING

- Establish a collaborative urban project, based on a comprehensive assessment shared by local actors and the population, development methods adapted to the size of the municipality and a charter of long-term objectives
- Strengthen local support resources provided by the National Agency for Local Cohesion (ANCT) and sub-prefectures, improve coordination between support services, set up a “one-stop shop” in each department to support urban projects, clarify the employment status of local administration agents, make it easier for small communities to access calls for proposals
- Incorporate sustainable economic development and employment into the framework agreement for the Small Towns of Tomorrow revitalisation projects, and involve stakeholders in the governance of the agreement, with an approval process

POINT II: PROMOTING JOINT URBAN PLANNING FROM THE ASSESSMENT PHASE TO THE FINAL PROJECT

- Develop circular urban planning, carry out an assessment on the buildings to be renovated, launch local pilot programmes and facilitate the professional integration of young people in the corresponding sectors with sponsorships and oversight
- Prioritise the quality of public spaces, develop innovative housing projects adaptable to the living circumstances and age of the residents, encourage social and generational diversity and co-housing, include appropriate and multi-purpose business premises on the ground floor of buildings on defined street lines, support the development of communal spaces
- Strengthen existing public land agencies and set up land-use mechanisms adapted to rural areas in each department

POINT III ACCOMMODATING ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure the quality of digital coverage, develop local agricultural industries linked to local food projects and work with economic development networks to encourage the sustainable revitalisation of the economy in small town and village centres (crafts, the local and circular economy, the silver economy, childcare, tourism enhancements)
- Establish a core package of local public services and promote access to public services, the emergence of new professions and employment growth
- Encourage the expansion of the omnichannel approach to crafts and local retail, strengthen initiatives to facilitate the transfer/takeover of these businesses, recruit a town centre or inter-municipal retail manager

POINT IV MEETING ENVIRONMENTAL AND MOBILITY CHALLENGES

- Initiate coordinated planning projects to adapt to climate change, maintain public investments in energy renovation and set up reciprocity agreements between communities
- Secure dedicated funding for the implementation of mobility packages by inter-municipal transport authorities (with an earmarked national fund)
- Promote low-carbon mobility in city centres and intermodality, strengthen intercity links, encourage car-sharing, car-pooling and green modes of transport

POINT V: DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A COMPREHENSIVE LONG-TERM POLICY

- Take the time to develop comprehensive, participatory and coordinated projects
- Develop long-term funding to implement revitalisation projects and give financial resources back to communities.