
It's a Wonderful Life – a tale of community banking



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The film, 'It's a Wonderful Life', is loosely based on Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol'. It was released in 1946 and stars James Stewart as its main character, George Bailey, who is the town's Bank Manager. It captures his life in the town up to the moment when he is contemplating suicide. The last time I watched it, I remember assuming the main theme of the film was the despair of a man amidst a mid-life crisis. This year, perhaps because of my work with Scottish Communities Finance Ltd, what resonated most was the role of the local bank in assisting local people and shaping the development of the town.

The mission of the bank is very simple – use the money deposited by local savers to assist people to start small businesses and help local people buy and build houses. The pride of those residents, who leave behind slum housing to move into new homes, because the bank believed in them, is very evident. As is the joy of the man who opens his own café. Throughout the film, it is made clear that the bank isn't the most profitable, but yet it continues to be supported by the locals as it continues to support them.

The significance of the bank to the neighbourhood is perhaps most evident when George is shown the ghost of Christmas future and what happens to the town without him and without the bank. It has become a temple to Mammon with a focus on greed alongside the diseases of addiction and the persistence of slum housing. It has become a town devoid of any community spirit or mutual co-operation. It is George's realisation of the importance of his work and that of the bank that is the restorative moment of the picture.

The film served to remind me again of the many, many Scottish communities that are bereft of local banks or the financial institutions that are so crucial to the socio-economic life of a town and its citizens. It highlighted the way in which the old personal 'relationship-based' model of banking has been supplanted by the remote 'A.I.' banking model. Finally, it reverberated with the diminished state of our current town centres which are in danger of becoming ghost towns, unable to meet our basic needs. For George, redemption comes with the re-evaluation of his life, his work and a renewed commitment to his town.

In this COVID era, many of us are also re-evaluating the role of our local neighbourhoods in relation to our health and wellbeing. The pandemic has forced us recognise our dependency upon our local neighbours, shops and services, so essential in the creation of robust, vibrant and resilient places to live and work. Luckily, there are plenty of examples across Scotland of social and community enterprises rallying their communities, using local financial and other resources to save and renovate buildings; restore our high streets; provide local goods and services and making the necessary environmental changes to protect their long-term future sustainability.