

A vision for a 21st century Kirkcaldy Town Centre

Vision and Principles

Love Oor Lang Toun is committed to:

“Creating a 21st century Kirkcaldy Town Centre that local people will be proud of.”

Our vision looks forward to a different and contemporary town centre of independent retail, cafe culture, market spaces, leisure, living space and an active waterfront. We recognise that the large, corporate chains which dominated our high streets have moved to the retail parks and are selling online, leaving many large, empty retail units in our town centres. We want to provide and influence innovative uses of space and repurpose buildings that create experiences and a destination for locals and visitors. And we want our biggest advocates to be the residents of Kirkcaldy.

Principles

The projects and activities we undertake will be guided by these following principles:

- **Building on previous renewal and regeneration work**, recognising work carried out by former BID company, *Kirkcaldy4All*; the multi-sector collective, *Kirkcaldy's Ambitions*; *The Adam Smith Global Foundation*, reclaiming Kirkcaldy's most famous son; and the £30m of investment by *Fife Council* in Kirkcaldy Town Centre;
- **Employability and Business Opportunities**, which provide employment, skills, and encourage entrepreneurs in both the business sector and the social enterprise sector;
- **Climate change and sustainability**, so that we play our role in contributing to positive climate and environmental change;
- **Collaboration with other relevant organisations, including local and national government**, because it is by working together towards a common vision that we can find the resources to make real change;
- **Contemporary design**, which enhances the wonderful architectural heritage in our town centre that spans from the 15th century to the present day;
- **Affordable town centre living**, providing accommodation for people who want to live in the heart of the town;
- **Digital infrastructure and technology**, which gives businesses good broadband and wi-fi connections, and provides us with important information about town centre footfall and air quality;
- **Continuous community and business engagement**, because we are a community-led organisation that strives to involve the people of Kirkcaldy in regenerating their town centre.

Love Oor Lang Toun

Love Oor Lang Toun (LOLT) is a community-based organisation that was formed in 2020 following the demise of the BID company, Kirkcaldy4All. The town centre had just experienced the shock national retailers closing their outlets with the resulting impact of reducing high street footfall. Initially a group of volunteers, our challenge was to develop a new model for business support, community engagement, positive place promotion and income generation. Our first action was to respond to lockdown by helping local small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to start trading online while still providing a local service and raising their profile. As restrictions were eased, we worked with a local media company to create several promotional videos with the theme 'Kirkcaldy is Open', highlighting businesses and encouraging people to visit the town centre.

We then partnered with Greener Kirkcaldy to run an online community conversation event - *Kirkcaldy After Lockdown* - attended by 60 people. Inspiring guest speakers and a facilitated discussion helped draw out what people love about Kirkcaldy, and a follow-up survey gathered input from a further 150 people about their aspirations for the future of the town. To celebrate our first anniversary in March 2021, we ran another consultation event entitled *The Future Is Now*, and the guest speaker was Professor Leigh Sparks, Chair of Scotland's Towns Partnerships and Professor of Retail Studies at the University of Stirling. This session focussed on the town centre, particularly empty units and vacant sites. However, feedback from our community was overwhelmingly positive and we used it to inform our plans.

Following successful funding applications, we now employ two part-time staff and commissioned an architectural firm to help us undertake a feasibility study. We continued our support to local businesses by promoting the Kirkcaldy Gift Card and other shop local initiatives. We launched Kirkcaldy's first Christmas Market in partnership with Artisan Fridays, the high street market that has become a key element of town centre renewal. We also promoted a Christmas Festive Fiver campaign with 20 local high street businesses.

The feasibility study focused on how we could repurpose empty buildings and sites, which we preferred to call 'opportunity sites'. Following an initial survey by the architects, we consulted face-to-face and had over 200 conversations with local people, and held a special consultation session with 30 local businesses. We are now drafting a vision document for Kirkcaldy Town Centre, and hope to have it adopted as a place plan to influence planning and investment in the town centre.

Kirkcaldy

Kirkcaldy gained the nickname of the 'Lang Toun' because of its mile-long main street in the 16th and 17th centuries. By the late 19th century, that main street had extended to four miles after surrounding settlements stretching from Linktown up to the Gallatown were absorbed into the town. The town was an important seaport and industries grew up around salt, coal mining and nail making, referred to in the *Wealth of Nations* written by its most famous son, Adam Smith.

The industrial revolution brought increased production in the linen industry, which paved the way for Kirkcaldy's most famous product, linoleum. The industry grew rapidly through the 19th and 20th centuries, and Kirkcaldy was exporting thousands of rolls of linoleum across the world from seven factories covering over 55 acres of land and employing over 4000 people. As well as linoleum Kirkcaldy had two large coal mines, Seafield Colliery and Frances Colliery, employing over 3000 workers between them. The industrial estates had factories of household names of the time such as Babygro, GEC, and Rank Strand.

Kirkcaldy was a powerful industrial town with plenty of employment and well-paid jobs. The High Street thrived, and all the big national chain stores were there. The Mercat shopping centre was built in the 1970s, followed by The Postings in 1981. Kirkcaldy had more shopping space per head of population than Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh. It had become a major retail centre with busloads of visitors coming in to shop during the day, and to enjoy the nightlife in the evening.

However, the decline of the linoleum industry started in the 1960s as vinyl flooring became more popular. Most of the UK coal industry closed through the 1980s, and UK manufacturing was severely hit as China and the Asian countries were producing goods that were cheap to import. Kirkcaldy, like many other towns, was seeing its skilled manufacturing industries being replaced by service industries, and that had a consequent effect on the High Street.

Then in 1997 a new shopping concept appeared that had been mooted for some time. The retail park had finally reached Kirkcaldy. The first unit that opened was Sainsbury's, and soon after many of the high street chains moved into the units that were cheaper to maintain, had lower rateable values, and free parking. Despite all this Kirkcaldy Town Centre was still punching above its weight, until another significant game changer appeared, shopping by internet. In 2006, approximately 3% of retail shopping was done online. Within 15 years that number rose to over 30% with the big chains getting in on the action. Business models changed and stores were closing at an alarming rate, with multiple-outlet retailers closing an average of 14,000 stores per year across the UK in the past seven years. And then came the COVID-19 pandemic. Some stores were closed and never opened again, and the Arcadia group of stores (including BHS, Burtons, Top Shop, and Debenhams) disappeared or were sold off to the big internet companies who were the new digital high street.

While this is a story of towns and cities the length and breadth of the UK and beyond, for Kirkcaldy, a town with a proud industrial history and a retail offering that went way beyond its boundaries, this was a major blow to its long high street. However, these past few years have shown how the town has bounced back. New independent businesses have been opening at a regular pace over the past few years. From shops that have been providing high quality household goods, fashion and beauty services, and cafes and restaurants with a variety of contemporary food catering for all tastes, Kirkcaldy Town Centre is going through a bit of a renaissance. A significant feature has been the Artisan Friday market started by a local jeweller. The market has transformed Fridays and the increase in footfall is palpable.

Our High Street is changing and adapting to a new form of town centre, and that includes our Waterfront which has seen significant public investment to create a more accessible and pleasing public place. And while all this is happening, our history and heritage are being celebrated through projects like the Adam Smith Heritage Centre, the Kings Theatre project, and the refurbishment of the Adam Smith Theatre.

The Future Is Now

The Feasibility Study

Love Oor Lang Toun believes that we need a planned approach to regenerating our Town Centre. While many new businesses were being established, they mainly take up the smaller units that are available. We are grateful for that as even small retail units can quickly look dilapidated if they are left empty for a few months. Our concern was the bigger units and particularly the Marks & Spencers building that has a total floor space of over 4500sqm. When we started on the feasibility study, we had a vacancy rate of 30% of town centre commercial units – one of the highest in Scotland. The Postings (now closed) had made national news because the owner had put it up for auction with a starting price of £1.

As well as the M&S building, we wanted to look at other empty units such as the BHS unit, Burtons, Debenhams, and former bank buildings. We also wanted to consider some Waterfront locations such as the vacant site of the former swimming pool, Volunteers Green, and the unsightly Esplanade Multi-Storey Car Park. Rather than describe these as vacant or derelict sites we prefer to use the term ‘opportunity units’, and the architect’s brief was to look at how they could be sustainably redeveloped or repurposed. We would assess the feasibility of bringing a small number of these empty units in the Town Centre back into meaningful, sustainable use. We will then seek funding to develop a collaborative programme of activity to identify, re-purpose and fill “opportunity units” throughout the town centre.

Our aim is to develop plans for the improvement of these sites, as the first step towards an ambitious programme of work to make the town centre more attractive, active and engaging as a place where our community want to live, work, study and spend time. Keeping ourselves open to possibilities, backed up by evidence and intelligence gathering, we can see transformation through, for example, community spaces, artists’ studios, makers’ spaces, and incubator units for local entrepreneurs. On some of the sites, retail units could be replaced with housing, mixed-use developments or new greenspaces.

More importantly we wanted the people of Kirkcaldy to join us on this journey, and so we are committed to continually engaging them in the process, reporting back to them on progress, and ensuring that we reflect what they want to see in their Town Centre.

The Initial Proposals

Our initial proposals were based on previous discussions we had from the online consultations and survey. The main themes we wanted covered were:

Family-friendly leisure

Providing activities that people of all ages can enjoy, from pop-up bowling alleys and giant monopoly to cinema and night-time entertainment

Town Centre living and working

Over 50% of upstairs property is empty and unused. This provides scope for social housing, probably aimed at singles or couples who would enjoy town centre living. An investment in digital connectivity can also create short-term rentable and flexible spaces for people to work individually, or provide low-rent office or makers space for start-ups

An active seafront

The focus on retail on the High Street has led to the town ‘turning its back’ on the Waterfront. Over the past few years there has been slow but significant change. Fife Council has invested in improving the public realm, including a new sea wall and walkway, and built a new leisure centre on the Waterfront. A contemporary apartment block with sea views has also demonstrated the way forward in developing the Waterfront. However, local people are looking for a traditional seaside feel of prom cafes and ice-cream parlours.

Access to fresh, local produce

One of the most successful initiatives has been the development of a regular Friday artisan market on the High Street that has increased footfall during that day. Proving there is a demand for local and fresh produce, a fishmonger, butcher and a greengrocer have now opened on the High Street, which we have not had for a long time.

A thriving town centre

A combination of these initiatives will create a thriving high street, as opposed to a busy high street, which will be seen as a place to live, a place to work, and a place to meet, greet and eat.

These concepts formed the basis of our concepts and consultation. We spoke with over 200 people directly as well as having an online consultation from our website. We also ran a special session that involved local town centre businesses to hear their views. Once we collated all the responses, we asked a local Social Studies student in her final year, who is focusing on town centre development, to independently analyse the responses.

(The visuals we used can be found at this link <https://www.loveoorlangtoun.com/online-consultation>)

The public’s response

ENTERTAINMENT

A theme that was prevalent amongst the answers provided by the public in their response to Love Oor Lang Toun’s ‘The Future is Now’ campaign relates to that of entertainment. From wanting more hospitality venues to an arcade – the wide range of answers highlight that Kirkcaldy lacks in entertainment opportunities for individuals of all age groups.

Many responses stated that they would like to see more family friendly venues such as a cinema, bowling alley, mini golf, soft play, and science centre. This also highlights the need to establish a stronger night trade across the Kirkcaldy town centre, including more restaurants that offer vegan/gluten free options and a wider variety of cuisines whilst using local produce.

Other responses highlighted the possibility of new themed bars – including retro games. This concept is gaining popularity across the UK with venues in Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, and one recently opening in Edinburgh. Other rather unique responses included the likes of dodgems and giant monopoly.

CULTURE

The public showed that aspects of city culture should be brought to Kirkcaldy. Responses highlighted the need to offer greater support for the creative industries (designers, artists, ceramicists, etc.) and for pop up artisan stalls and markets. Particularly creating smaller workspaces for individuals from a variety of industry areas that would be financially viable including hiring office spaces or desks. and having a set location.

The suggestion to offer rented workspaces/desks in the public's response is an important one. As the world witnesses a transformation in working patterns due to COVID-19, the shift away from offices in city centres to spaces at home can be beneficial for Kirkcaldy's town centre. Attracting workers, and students who need a quiet workspace, could be a turning point in bringing a city culture to the town.

Empty spaces for independent businesses who could offer an entirely different shopping experience to neighbouring areas. Responses also brought to attention the need for a better variety of shops including more options for men's and shoe shops.

Another crucial aspect that encapsulates the theme of culture comes down to the history and community feel of Kirkcaldy itself. Responses called attention to the lack of appreciation and celebration of the town's history with suggestions of a walking tour and boat trips. Other suggestions included hosting more festivals and big events such as a Christmas light switch-on and a drive-in cinema.

A popular response was in relation to making Kirkcaldy more like a traditional seaside town with ice cream parlours, bucket and spade shops, picnic spots and outdoor hospitality looking out on to the water. Bringing this culture to the waterfront and a city culture to the high street would create a unique town centre.

ENVIRONMENT

People called for more greenspace in the town centre. Greenspace in a general sense can include the likes of grass pitches, trees/flowers, playparks etc. particularly at the coastal front at the prom and along the coastal path.

Other responses called attention to the existing environment and suggests that the town centre be made safer and cleaner. Safety measures include the likes of cycle lanes and a pedestrianised high street.

However, there was a mixed response by the public regarding cars in the town centre. Free parking was a very popular solution in bringing people back to the high street, particularly as retail parks have taken advantage of this and grown in recent years across the country. On the other hand, other responses wanted to pedestrianise the high street completely so that noise pollution was reduced and more greenspace or 'pocket places' could be introduced. Overall, in regenerating the town centre/high street, Kirkcaldy can push to do this in an environmentally friendly way and push the arguments of sustainability whilst improving its physical appeal.

ACCESSIBILITY

The final big theme is accessibility. Firstly, to have more transport links in and around the town centre. This could be achieved by introducing cycle lanes or, as an individual suggested, moving the taxi rank to a more accessible area. This would help those who use private and/or 'public' taxi services – particularly if they cannot use a bus or train service.

Another important suggestion was to create more of a 'link' between the high street and the Kirkcaldy waterfront. As it stands, they are two separate aspects of the town centre and more could be done to integrate them. As a seaside town, more emphasis should be placed on the coastal front and use this as an advantage to draw tourists and nearby locals in, even if this meant bringing a hospitality and retail

sector to the prom as the responses suggested. Examples include having an ice-cream stop, more street food vendors and cafes.

Accessibility is also important for those with disabilities. As well as moving or adding another taxi rank, other suggestions were to offer more delivery services in the area, better disabled access in the town centre more generally and to offer trolleys for those who may struggle with their bags that can be used all over.

Linking back to the theme of culture, a very popular response was to create more dog-friendly units on the high street, and to have more pram-friendly spaces and toilets that incorporate baby changing units. Other ideas suggested to have a supervised play space that would allow for the adults to go shopping themselves.

Lastly, creating more living space and social housing in the town centre is being placed under the wider theme of accessibility. With large spaces laying empty above shops on the high street there is a very realistic opportunity to renovate these into flats.

Some thoughts and conclusions

Kirkcaldy Town Centre has faced the same fundamental issues that most town centres across the UK have had to deal with. The migration of what were considered high street staples to the retail parks, and the rise of internet shopping has hit hard. Town centres seem to go through some sort of life cycle of having been thriving retail and shopping centres; to then witness a decline creating empty units and a rise in service shops including pawnbrokers and charity outlets; and then a renaissance of independent retail, café culture, and artisan makers. Where they are on that cycle depends on the town and its history, its location in terms of where it lies with neighbouring towns, and its socio-economic context.

Larger towns who have had national retailers dominate their high street will be left with the issue of larger, empty units. Clearly there is a lot of potential in repurposing these units, but where is the investment to come from? Is it likely that private developers will see the opportunities? Or do we need some incentivisation to help that along?

Similarly, while there is a lot of empty property that can be converted to living accommodation, it is highly unlikely that property developers will see it as a viable commercial option. Many of these properties require retrofitting of access, including staircases, as will need much work to bring them up to modern fire and noise regulations.

Kirkcaldy has benefited from regeneration funding from various sources including the Scottish Government and Fife Council. Some of that funding came from the many local voluntary organisations such as the Old Kirk Trust, the Adam Smith Global Foundation, and Fife Historic Building Trust using the former CARS scheme. While the work and collaboration of these local organisations is to be commended, we do need long-term commitment from the Scottish Government that town centre regeneration will be supported in the coming years. We must move away from the 'last-minute' decisions to provide funds to local councils for regeneration, for them then to be told it must be committed within the financial year. This does not make for good planning and is not an efficient use of funds.

Some towns will need some restructuring of infrastructure and space, and that will require some public investment. The current rating system does not help matters and there needs to be a new way of thinking about property taxation, particularly on the business side that will favour town centre development.