



Ayr Town Centre Framework Online Consultation 15th January – 1st March 2024

**Response of SAVE Britain's Heritage
8th February 2024**

1. Do you agree with the broad aims and objectives (Boards 1 and 2)?

Yes

No

Some - give details / alternative suggestions?

SAVE Britain's Heritage has a long-term interest in seeing Ayr and its historic buildings revitalised and celebrated. We therefore welcome this consultation and the council's commitment to developing a vision and strategy for the town centre.

SAVE agrees with the stated objectives and outcomes set out in Board 2, but there is no detail or strategy on how these will be delivered. The ten key projects and programmes need to be explicitly linked to the proposed outcomes and demonstrate how they will deliver them. Activity alone will not deliver these outcomes.

2. Do you think that the Vision for Ayr Town Centre (Board 3) reflects or is similar to your own vision?

Yes

No

If not, what would be an appropriate collective vision for Ayr Town Centre?

The council's vision should focus on the natural strengths of Ayr, namely: seaside location, historic built environment, cultural heritage and its international reputation through Robert Burns and golf. This needs to be distilled into a statement which is concise, easily understood, meaningful and believable for the people of the town and further afield.

3. Would the re-organisation of Ayr Rail Station as an integrated Transport Interchange help to regenerate the Town Centre?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

There is an obvious opportunity and need to redevelop the station, the station hotel and to upgrade Burns Statue Square. The quality of the historic built environment around both station and square is key to making a place somewhere people want to visit and to spend time in, and this should be the key focus of the strategy. Ayr Town Centre is a place of obvious character, history and atmosphere. This has developed over hundreds of years and tells the story of the town and its history. It is essential that as much of this is retained as possible. The demolition of historic buildings (and their replacement with modern, contemporary architecture) directly undermines this, destroying the historic core of the town and erasing the story of the town.

There is no doubt that creating a modern railway station which is fully accessible will provide a better service to travelers than the current arrangements. However, this can be done without tearing the heart out of the town.

Replacing what is left of the grand architecture of the station hotel with a modern station and square, with no local relevance, does not tell the history of the town. It is merely a functional building/space which will jar with the town's strong existing architecture, in the same way the Cutty Sark Centre and the modern square it sits in, has done at the other end of the High Street.

Transport interchange

We see the repurposing of the north wing of Ayr Station Hotel and the clock tower as the ideal means of retaining the original and historic gateway to the town. The council and Network Rail have the perfect opportunity to send a signal with this project that Ayr is open for business and cares about its history, which goes hand in hand with the future prosperity of the town.

It is essential that any new bus station be open to all operators and not restricted to a single owner / operator, as is the case currently. This will increase competition, increase consumer choice and provide a much-needed base for tour buses to drop tourists into the town centre.

4. Should improvements be made to the Burns Statue Square to the Town Centre? What specific issues need to be addressed?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

Retaining the north wing and tower of the station hotel

The retention of the north wing and tower of the station hotel is essential to retain the identity of the town and the immediate setting of Burns Statue Square. It must be used as the design cornerstone for a new, modern station and redeveloped square.

We welcome the image presented for Strategic Project 2. *Robert Burns Square - Southern Gateway* which shows what looks to be the north wing and tower retained and highlighted in colour as a clear focal point building.

We agree there is now an opportunity to improve both the facilities for the rail traveller and to create an arrival experience for visitors to the town. It is also an opportunity for the council to show leadership, that it cares about the history of the town and that it will do everything in its power to celebrate that history. The north wing and tower of the station hotel are of landmark quality and size and would therefore form the ideal centre piece of a new station complex which opens out onto the improved Burns Statue Square, book ending this side of the square.

5. Would you support redevelopment of the Kyle Shopping Centre and a masterplan to steer future development of the area identified (Board 8)?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

We welcome measures for reducing the historic over provision of retail space and addressing the need to bring prominent and central sites like The Kyle and Arran shopping centres back into use. Currently these sites are closed and create a large barrier between the High Street to the east and the historic streets and cultural landmarks which characterise the town moving towards the seafront and Esplanade.

Redevelopment should however be sensitive and sympathetic to the historic qualities of existing buildings. The masterplan for this large site should detail the historic buildings and routes on and around The Kyle and prioritise retaining buildings of architectural quality as part of this revitalised urban quarter.

Detailed design guidance about the architectural quality, scale, use class and location of new buildings and improved public realm should also be included to ensure the overall historic character and setting of the town centre is preserved and enhanced.

Only a detailed and comprehensive masterplan will have the ability of delivering on the council's three key objectives set out on Board 1, particularly 'Building primacy of space'. Defining the architectural quality and a sustainable mix of uses for the site will be key if redevelopment is to last the tests of time and avoid the ultimate failure of both previous comprehensive development schemes.

6. Do you agree with promoting the Town Centre as somewhere to live?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

Town centres can serve as great places to live, and catalysts for wider regeneration if approached carefully and imaginatively. A key starting point for any large-scale change to town centre use and character is the repurposing of existing buildings. Ayr is blessed in this regard, with many important and characterful historic buildings throughout the town centre offering the opportunity to create a range of unique and interesting accommodation for all population demographics.

Starting from scratch by simply clearing high profile sites or large numbers of existing buildings cannot be a solution in itself. Any successful town centre regeneration will need to create new accommodation within and alongside the existing urban fabric.

Making targeted funding available could also form a positive impetus for owners of empty existing building stock to refurbish and upgrade these assets to provide modern residential accommodation.

7. Do you agree that there should be greater long-term investment in the public realm, active travel and measures to enhance place quality, heritage etc?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

We would emphasise the need for long-term investment to focus on celebrating the quality of Ayr's built and cultural heritage. Retaining existing historic buildings of architectural quality would be a positive step to achieving this.

Focusing on retaining and reusing existing historic buildings should also go hand in hand with developing robust policy guidance for South Ayrshire Council's next Local development Plan (LDP 3) placing greater emphasis on the retention and reuse of older buildings on the basis of sustainability (embodied carbon) and heritage benefits.

The retention and repurposing of the north wing and tower of the station hotel would serve as the perfect pilot project for the council to show it has the right credentials in heritage and sustainability terms.

The importance of place

There are many reasons why one town centre is successful, and another is less so, but it is always the case that a successful town centre is a place that attracts people and where people want to spend time. This is most often due to a combination of factors such as attractive retail offer, good bars/restaurants, attractive physical environment, accessibility and regular festivals/events which animate the space. A town centre which does not provide these (or provides some but not others) will always struggle.

Due to the prevalence of national multiple retailers across all our towns, and the development of standardised retail units over the past 25 years, many of our town centres have lost their atmosphere and historic character. These are often referred to as "clone towns". Towns which have retained and cherished their built heritage such as York, St Andrews and Edinburgh have succeeded in attracting more visitors, independent retailers and private sector investment. They continue to flourish even against the relentless tide of online shopping, and they provide a template for towns such as Ayr to follow. With the right policies and targeted public sector investment, the town centre of Ayr still has sufficient quality buildings to tell the story of the town and to retain its unique architectural heritage.

To do this, however, requires leadership, investment and stamina from the local authority. The retention of the north wing and tower of the station hotel would be essential and the starting point for the town to fight back against years of decline.

8. Should more be done to promote the Town Centre's creative, cultural and evening economies?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

We consider a key ingredient to achieving robust and sustainable cultural and evening economies is investment in existing building stock and character. Repurposing existing buildings not only brings life back into town centres but also allows the council to showcase a range of characterful, versatile and inspiring spaces for new and existing residents and businesses. Versatility and variety of offer is critical if town centre uses are to be sustainable in the long term.

In terms of attractive new visitors and businesses, it is worth noting that people visit places which offer attractive and interesting historic environments. Creating a place with atmosphere that is unique to Ayr will be key to unlocking success in the town centre.

9. Should more be done to support Town Centre businesses? What sort of measures would be most effective?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

Grants and tax incentives for refurbishing or re-purposing existing historic buildings are important catalysts for the long term stability and vibrancy of town centres and businesses. Demolition and re-build are far more disruptive to town centres, often affecting large numbers of neighbouring businesses for long periods of time. Perceptions that the existing town centre is thriving will go hand in hand with investment in existing building stock and public facilities.

10. Are improvements along the Esplanade a good idea? What would you like to see change?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

The Esplanade is another heritage calling card for the town and we would wish to see any plans for this historic seafront include the long term integration and use of historic buildings like the Category B listed Ayr Pavilion. Any interventions should be high quality materials and in keeping with the existing open character and architecture of the promenade.

11. Do you agree with the limited number of priority projects to support the future growth of Ayr Town Centre? If not, what priority issues would you like to raise?

Yes

No

Reasons / specific issues or concerns:

The retention and refurbishment of the North Wing of Ayr Station hotel should be a priority project that will spearhead the future growth of Ayr Town Centre.

12. Do you have any comments or ideas to support the Outline Delivery Plan (Board 13)?

Whilst we appreciate the delivery plan set out on Board 13 is indicative only, it should however also be realistic. The idea that all ten strategic projects and investment programmes will be fully scoped out by the end of this year (2024) and then in full implementation mode in under 12 months' time (2025) seems unachievable.

Given the scale and strategic importance to the town of the proposals for Ayr Station (and surviving section of the hotel) and Burns Statue Square, the suggestion that these complex projects can be realistically completed between 2026 and 2028 is not credible. We would encourage the council to manage expectations early on by recalibrating these delivery forecasts to ensure they are fair and achievable.

In relation to the proposed improvements to the station and possible new transport hub, unless the Council instigates Compulsory Purchase Order procedures immediately then these projects will be totally reliant on the goodwill of the current owner to transfer ownership. If this does not happen, (and this is very likely given the hotel's long history of ownership issues), then these critical projects will stall until the land is acquired, which could easily take up to or in excess of three years. In this scenario the delivery plan proposal to start the project by 2028 will be unrealistic.

13. If you have any other comments, questions or suggestions on the proposals please enter them here.

14. If you would like to be updated on the project please add your email address below.

office@savebritainsheritage.org