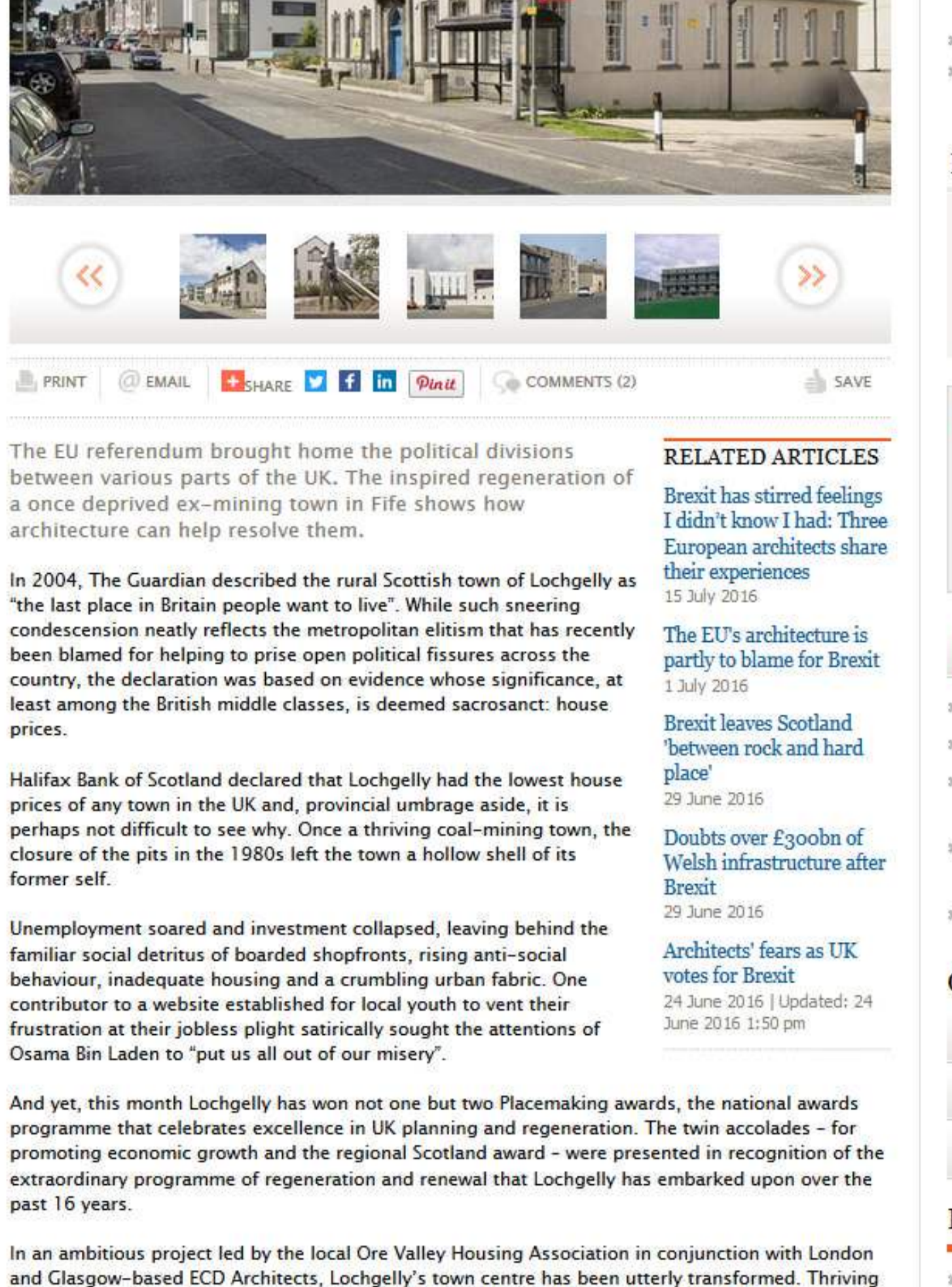


The rebirth of Lochgelly and lessons for Brexit Britain

21 July 2016 | By Ike Ijeh



The EU referendum brought home the political divisions between various parts of the UK. The inspired regeneration of a once deprived ex-mining town in Fife shows how architecture can help resolve them.

In 2004, The Guardian described the rural Scottish town of Lochgelly as "the last place in Britain people want to live". While such sneering condescension neatly reflects the metropolitan elitism that has recently been blamed for helping to prise open political fissures across the country, the declaration was based on evidence whose significance, at least among the British middle classes, is deemed sacrosanct: house prices.

Halifax Bank of Scotland declared that Lochgelly had the lowest house prices of any town in the UK and that, provincial umbrage aside, it is perhaps not difficult to see why. Once a thriving coal-mining town, the closure of the pits in the 1980s left the town a hollow shell of its former self.

Unemployment soared and investment collapsed, leaving behind the familiar social detritus of boarded shopfronts, rising anti-social behaviour, inadequate housing and a crumbling urban fabric. One contributor to a website established for local youth to vent their frustration at their jobsless plight satirically sought the attentions of Osama Bin Laden to "put us all out of our misery".

And yet, this month Lochgelly has won not one but two Placemaking awards, the national awards programme that celebrates excellence in UK planning and regeneration. The twin accolades – for promoting economic growth and the regional Scotland award – were presented in recognition of the extraordinary programme of regeneration and renewal that Lochgelly has embarked upon over the past 16 years.

In an ambitious project led by the local Ore Valley Housing Association in conjunction with London and Glasgow-based ECD Architects, Lochgelly's town centre has been utterly transformed. Thriving new shops have been opened, historic fabric has been restored and converted, facilities have been improved and new housing and public spaces created, and scores of new businesses have been opened by local residents, galvanising a new era of economic activity in the region.



Source: Alan McAtteer
Lochgelly's high street has been the focus of the town's ambitious sixteen year regeneration programme

The remarkable story of Lochgelly's renewal extends far beyond the confines of architecture and design, and it does so for two principal reasons. First, it offers a sobering treatise on the genuine delivery of placemaking and regeneration, terms cynically commandeered by far grander development projects, particularly in London, but rarely convincingly delivered.

And second, it is impossible to separate Lochgelly's transformation from the recent political events that have engulfed the country. Scotland may well have been the only region of the UK to contain constituencies which voted against remaining in the Common Market back in 1975, but it has clearly undergone a monumental U-turn in the meantime.

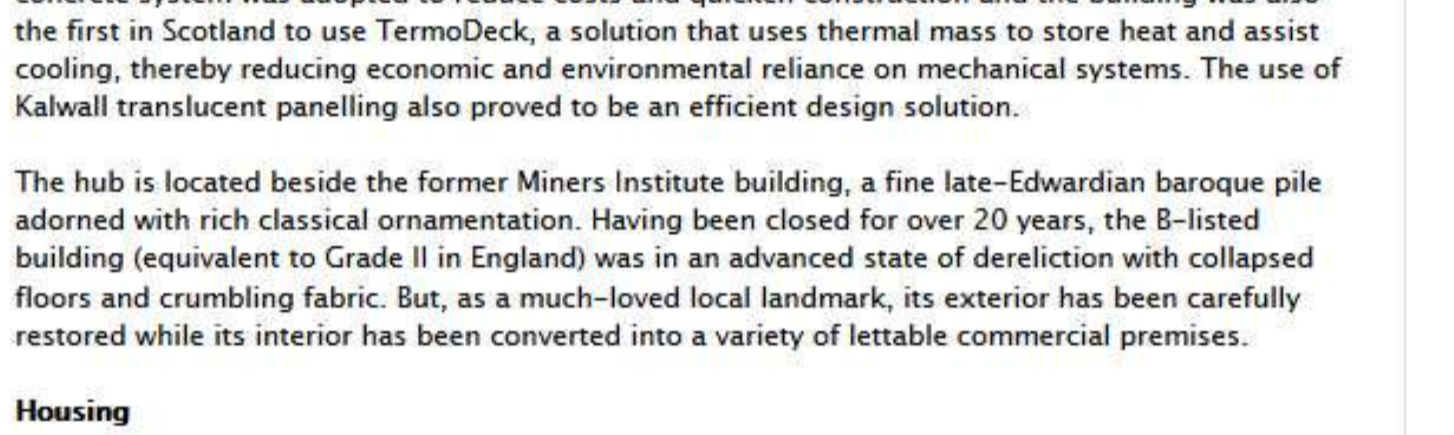
That said, it is no coincidence that many of the places in England and Wales that have suffered a similar economic trajectory to Lochgelly voted for Brexit. The wretched cycle of deprivation unleashed by the Thatcher government's industrial policy of pit closures was witnessed in ex-mining communities across northern Britain and South Wales. While governments, even Conservative ones, do not tend to close successful nationalised industries that generate vast sums of money for the Exchequer, there can be little doubt that the lack of a plan for how to replace the mining industry contributed to the separatist instincts once again being fermented in Scotland today.

Architecture is also politicised to a far greater extent in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK, and the Scottish executive being the only devolved administration to pursue an architecture policy. Lochgelly therefore provides a timely demonstration of the role that architecture can play in empowering socially disenfranchised communities across the country. Below is how they did it.

Masterplan

The masterplan for the regeneration of Lochgelly was drawn up in 2000 and, to its credit, what has been implemented today largely adheres to it. The achievement is all the more impressive for the fact that the plans successfully navigated the economic downturn of 2008 and beyond without being diluted or redrawn.

ECDA director Alistair Cameron prescribes this down to one key quality: flexibility. "The masterplan was incredibly loose – it wasn't prescriptive in terms of traditional architectural features like materials and detailing." Despite the vast difference in scale, this approach chimes with that of King's Cross Central in London, another regeneration project where the flexibility of the pre-recession masterplan is credited with ensuring the project's survival through the downturn and subsequently delivering considerable success.



Source: Alan McAtteer
A recently commissioned sculpture in the new town square references the region's mining heritage

So what then did the Lochgelly masterplan specify? Andrew Saunders, chief executive of Ore Valley Housing Association, says: "What it was particularly concerned with was land capacity, usage zoning, and landscaping and public realm. In fact, one of the key early areas for us was deciding what we were going to retain and demolish."

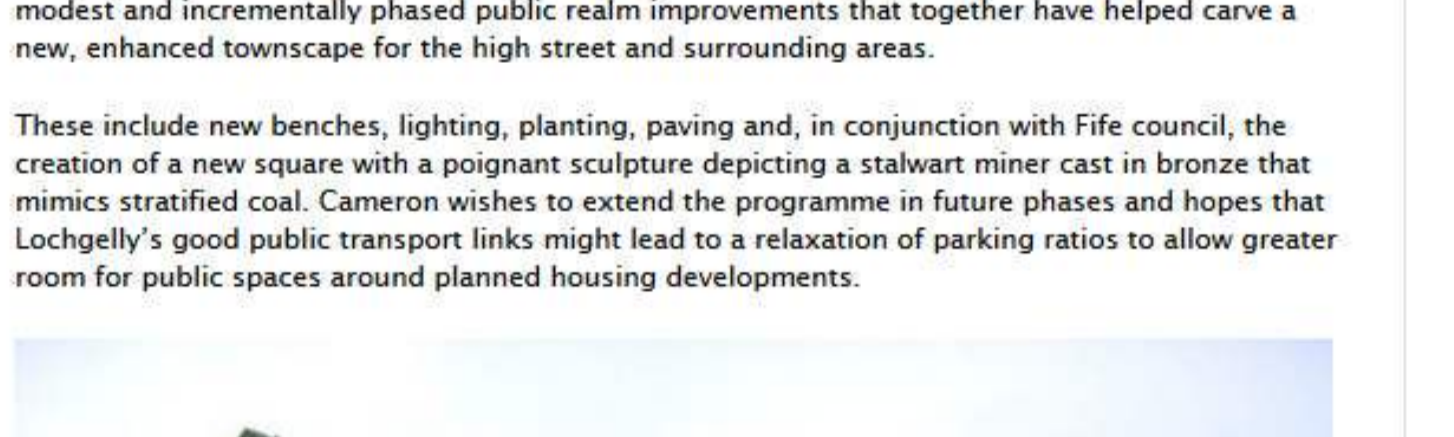
Another critical aspect of the masterplan was that, unlike other schemes that had sought to regenerate Lochgelly, Ore Valley focused exclusively on the town centre rather than the outskirts, choosing instead to deliver the core, "inner-city" renewal that would create the social, economic and urban conditions that could sustain peripheral expansion at a later date.

Delivery and finance

The role of delivering the masterplan and spearheading Lochgelly's regeneration was assumed by the Ore Valley Housing Association. Such strategic responsibilities clearly extend beyond those traditionally assumed by a housing association but, with partner support from Fife council and in conjunction with ECDA, Ore Valley was committed to "taking things beyond the physical and creating economic regeneration as well".

This process was enabled by the introduction of a clever commercial delivery model, as Saunders explains. "We set up subsidiary companies to deliver the non-housing elements of the masterplan. Not only did this insulate the core of our business from risk but it opened up all manner of funding streams not normally available to housing and allowed us to raise money in different ways."

These different ways included a range of public and private sources such as lottery funding, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, Historic Scotland, Fife council and, particularly relevant in light of recent events, the European Regional Development Fund, the EU's investment arm for disadvantaged areas.



Source: Alan McAtteer
The new business centre has provided commercial premises for almost 80 new employees and has helped spearhead new activity in the region

ECDA's design solution also responds to this constricted programme. A prefabricated, precast concrete system was adopted to reduce costs and quicken construction and the building was also the first in Scotland to use TermoDeck, a solution that uses thermal mass to store heat and assist cooling, thereby reducing economic and environmental reliance on mechanical systems. The use of Kallwall translucent panelling also proved to be an efficient design solution.

The hub is located behind the former Miners Institute building, a fine late-Edwardian baroque pile adorned with rich classical ornamentation. Having been closed for over 20 years, the B-listed building (equivalent to Grade II in England) was in an advanced state of dereliction with collapsed floors and crumbling fabric. But, as a much-loved local landmark, its exterior has been carefully restored while its interior has been converted into a variety of lettable commercial premises.

Housing

ECDA has designed 14 new-build homes in the latest phase of the wider masterplan. However, in a significant contrast to how regeneration might be managed in London and south-east England, Lochgelly's housing problem, as Cameron explains, was one of quality rather than quantity. "Much of the local housing stock was from the 1950s, which was probably the last period of significant local investment. However, most of it was three- or four-storey deck-access flats with a lack of defensive space which had deteriorated to such a state that it offered low quality and attracted low demand. Also, their density was too high for the current local population, which has fallen since they were built."



Source: Alan McAtteer
Unpopular 1950s deck housing has been demolished to make way for lower density development

Saunders sums up the challenge as one of "repopulation rather than population" and the masterplan has responded accordingly by demolishing one of the 1950s deck-access flats and replacing it with the kind of single-storey one- and two-bed units that local demographics now demand.

Further planning is stored elsewhere in the town centre. And in an endorsement of the masterplan's early decision to focus on town centre regeneration, the renewal of the town's core is now supporting plans for a 2,500-unit expansion of homes on the edge of the town.

Retail

One of the most pernicious symbols of a town centre in decline is the boarded-up shopfront, a sight that was previously ubiquitous in Lochgelly. While a handful remain, a new development in an earlier phase of the masterplan has vigorously bucked the trend. This block replaced retail units that were almost permanently shuttered, but inevitably posed the question: why should new retail work where old retail didn't? In order to deliver the new units, the design team had to resist calls to create housing rather than shops on the ground floor, but their solution represents a canny consolidation of both.

The ECDA-designed block features housing above the ground-floor retail units. However, should the retail ever fail, the units have been designed on the same structural footprints as the flats above, so they can easily be converted to residential. Even more ambitiously, the retail has been deliberately designed without shutters. "At first everyone thought this was crazy and would lead to vandalism," says Cameron, "but the opposite has happened. Because people have been given something new, the shopfronts have not been graffitied or damaged once and the units are fully occupied and thriving."

Source: Alan McAtteer
A thriving new parade of shutter-free shops has replaced the boarded up shop units that were once a feature of the high street

And according to Saunders, the omission of shutters was not the only risk the design team took. "Right at the start we took a decision that there would be no bookmakers, no hairdressers and no tattoo parlours. The town already has enough of these and we didn't think this kind of occupier would be right. It was a difficult sell to both the community and potential tenants – we literally had to say no to a major bookmaker who was making a generous offer on two units through clenched teeth. But we've been vindicated by the success, it was the right thing to do."

Public realm

Rightly, both Saunders and Cameron insist that regeneration in Lochgelly or anywhere is not just about buildings but what happens between them too. Accordingly, this awareness has formed the backbone of the masterplan and even led ECDA to appoint its own landscape architect to compile a landscape audit and help develop a public realm strategy. This strategy has led to a number of modest and incrementally phased public realm improvements that together have helped carve a new, enhanced townscape for the high street and surrounding areas.

These include new benches, lighting, planting, paving and, in conjunction with Fife council, the creation of a new square with a poignant sculpture depicting a stalwart miner cast in bronze that mimics stratified coal. Cameron wishes to extend the regeneration in future phases and hopes that Lochgelly's good public transport links might lead to a relaxation of parking ratios to allow greater room for public spaces around planned housing developments.

Source: Alan McAtteer
Despite being a focus of the community for decades, prior to regeneration the Miners Institute building had been empty for 20 years and was in an advanced derelict state

Community

As far as Saunders and Cameron are concerned, there is one element without which regeneration in Lochgelly and elsewhere would be impossible: community support. Public consultation is often viewed as a cynical exercise in imposition rather than interaction but as far as Saunders is concerned, it was critical to the success of the scheme.

"The key is developing the masterplan with the community. Then, by keeping true to the masterplan, you're always sure that you're carrying out the wishes of the community. That's not to say it's easy, the community doesn't always speak with one voice and the Community Regeneration Forum that Fife council set up was essential in ensuring that their views were conveyed to us as a single message. But it's worth the effort, as the community has to be part of the solution."

Both Saunders and Cameron offer multiple other tips for replicating the kind of success that has been achieved at Lochgelly. Being realistic about timescales and acknowledging that regeneration is a long, drawn-out process is one. Planning ahead is another, as proven by the progress made with the business centre once TCRF money became available.

Source: Alan McAtteer
The restoration of the former Miners Institute building into commercial premises has symbolised the town's rebirth

Equally, breaking the project down into manageable parts, a willingness to take risks, a strategic rather than opportunistic development approach, design that combines quality and pragmatism, and the overriding importance of public realm are all recommendations that can be extracted from the Lochgelly experience.

But all of these inevitably return to the theme of community, which as Lochgelly proves, must be understood and engaged with in order for regeneration to have any genuine chance of success. There is a tendency with regeneration projects, particularly in prosperous London, to sweep away what was there before and impose a new social and physical order in its place.

This is a grave mistake. Even the most deprived of communities will still be a community and some of the strongest examples of local spirit are found on some of the most blighted and blighted of housing estates. Understanding and connecting with that community is the surest way to guarantee that a sense of pride and ownership will transfer to the physical components of any new intervention. Disenfranchised residents cannot enjoy political engagement unless they are able to engage with their surroundings first. Lochgelly's thrilling renewal provides an inspirational account of just how powerful and exciting a tool architecture can be in expediting this process.

The Word on the Street

Marion Eccles has lived in Lochgelly since childhood and remembers moving here from nearby Dunfermline almost 65 years ago, just weeks after the Queen's coronation. She is largely positive about the recent changes. "It's not like it used to be but it's definitely getting better. There are more shops on the high street and the town feels more active than it has done in a long time."

Not everyone feels the same way. Douglas Rhodes is in his sixties and works in a high-street clothing store. He is more disparaging about recent development. "Nothing's changed, if you ask me. I've not seen much evidence of this so-called regeneration and as far as I'm concerned this place still needs a whole lot of money spent on it."

Mother-of-three Aileen Munroe is in her twenties and is more sympathetic. Although she is from the neighbouring town of Kirkcaldy, she had uncles who once worked in the local mines and has a friend who has recently been employed by one of the new shops that have opened up in Lochgelly. "I can't remember when the mines closed but I know from my relatives that it was horrible. A lot of people round here were angry and there's still some in my kin who can't find work. But at least some of these new shops and flats means this place isn't being ignored any more."

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READERS' COMMENTS (2)

Christopher Costelloe | 21 July 2016 10:00 am

Scotland did not vote against remaining in the Common Market in 1975. It voted 58.40% in favour of staying in.

Unsuitable or offensive? REPORT THIS COMMENT

Ike Ijeh | 21 July 2016 11:58 am

Apologies Christopher, you're quite right, text changed the indicate that Scotland was the only part of the UK that contained counties (Shetland and Western Isles) that voted against remaining in the Common Market in 1975.

Also, Scotland and N. Ireland showed the lowest levels of support for remaining in '75 (only 52.1% in N. Ireland and Wales were most in favour (70.1% and 66.4% respectively). It seems it's not just Scotland that has performed a u-turn!

Unsuitable or offensive? REPORT THIS COMMENT