

The Heart of the Fair City: A Community-Led Vision for a Pedestrian-First Perth

Executive Summary

Perth stands at a generational crossroads. Armed with the ambition to become "one of Europe's great small cities," significant public investment frameworks, and a transformative infrastructure project in the Cross Tay Link Road (CTLR), the city has a unique and fleeting opportunity to redefine its urban core for the 21st century. However, this ambition is challenged by the persistent issues facing many UK high streets: high retail vacancy rates, inconsistent footfall, and a city centre environment that community feedback suggests is failing to prioritise its most important users—people.

This report presents a comprehensive, evidence-based strategy for the rejuvenation of Perth city centre through a decisive shift towards a pedestrian-first philosophy. It argues that creating a high-quality, vibrant, and accessible public realm is not merely an aesthetic goal but the most potent economic, social, and environmental strategy available to the city. Drawing on extensive academic research, successful case studies from cities across the UK and internationally, and a detailed analysis of Perth's existing plans, this document provides a roadmap for transformation.

The analysis reveals a central paradox: Perth's existing "pedestrianised" zones are underperforming, a situation that this report attributes not to the failure of the pedestrianisation concept, but to an incomplete and disconnected implementation. The solution is not to retreat from this vision but to complete it, creating a truly coherent and high-quality network of streets and spaces for people.

The report's vision is woven into the Council's existing "Five Quarters" framework, proposing that a network of pedestrian-priority streets act as the "golden thread" that unifies these investment areas, maximising their synergy and collective impact. It details how the Culture Quarter can become a traffic-free hub, how the Station Quarter can provide a world-class welcome, and how greening strategies can be integrated throughout the city core.

Crucially, this report champions a community-led approach as the primary engine for change. It provides a practical "Community Toolkit" outlining how grassroots initiatives, from temporary "Open Streets" events to community-led greening projects, can be deployed. These actions are framed not only as a means of improving local areas but as a strategic tool for de-risking major investment. By demonstrating public support and proving the economic benefits of change at a small scale, the community can build an irrefutable business case for the permanent, large-scale public and private investment Perth seeks to attract.

The recommendations are clear and actionable:

Embrace a "Network-First" Approach: Prioritise investment in a high-quality, continuous pedestrian network that connects the Five Quarters.

Empower Community-Led Trials: Actively fund and support tactical, community-led projects to test ideas, build consensus, and gather data.

Develop an Integrated Access Strategy: Complement pedestrianisation with a robust strategy for peripheral parking, integrated public transport, and full accessibility for all users.

Formalise the Vision: Adopt the pedestrian-first network as a core principle within the Council's statutory planning and investment frameworks.

The completion of the CTLR will fundamentally alter traffic patterns, presenting a choice: to manage the consequences passively or to seize the opportunity proactively. This report argues for the latter. By placing people firmly at the heart of its city centre, Perth can secure a prosperous, vibrant, and sustainable future, truly earning its place as one of Europe's great small cities.

Introduction: The Case for a People-First Perth

This section establishes the strategic context for change, presenting both the ambition and the challenges facing the city. It frames the report not as a critique, but as a constructive, evidence-based pathway to achieving Perth's stated goals.

Perth's Ambition: "One of Europe's Great Small Cities"

Perth & Kinross Council has articulated a clear and ambitious vision for its future, aspiring for Perth to gain "an international reputation for enterprise, learning, culture and an exceptional quality of life".¹ This is not mere rhetoric; it is backed by substantial financial

planning and political will. The Council has launched a £530 million Investment Prospectus aimed at attracting domestic and international partners for transformative projects spanning from 2025 to 2040.³ This is complemented by a £97 million investment plan for leisure facilities, including the new PH2O centre in the Mill Quarter, designed to bring new life and activity into the city centre.⁴

These investment strategies are guided by long-term plans such as the Perth City Plan 2015-2035 and the Perth 2040 agenda. These documents explicitly call for "smart growth," a model of development that actively seeks to reduce car dependency, encourage the use of public transport, and create a high-quality, efficient, and connected urban environment.² The recommendations laid out in this report are designed not to replace these existing strategies, but to provide a powerful, evidence-based mechanism for their accelerated and successful delivery.

The Challenge: A City Centre at a Crossroads

Despite this clear ambition, Perth city centre faces significant headwinds that are common to urban cores across the United Kingdom. The seismic shifts in retail towards online commerce, coupled with post-pandemic changes in working patterns, have fundamentally altered the economic and social dynamics of the high street.⁷

A primary indicator of this strain is the retail vacancy rate. Data published in 2023 indicated that Perth's high street vacancy rate stood at 17.8%, a figure that compares unfavourably with other Scottish cities such as Inverness (8.5%) and Elgin (11.4%).⁹ This is not just a statistic; it has a tangible impact on the city's vitality. A 2023 retail study commissioned by the Council itself identified the detrimental visual effect of "large visible vacant units in the core pedestrianised part of the city centre," a sentiment echoed by the Perthshire Chamber of Commerce.⁷

Footfall, another key metric of city centre health, presents a complex picture. While one Council briefing noted a significant 68% increase in footfall recorded by city centre counters between March 2024 and January 2025, this must be contextualised.¹¹ Other commentary, including from local political representatives, has pointed to a perceived decline in footfall, linking it to factors such as the increase in homeworking among major employers like the Council itself.¹² This suggests that while the city can attract visitors, particularly around new attractions or events, achieving sustained, day-to-day vibrancy remains a core challenge.

This objective data is reinforced by subjective community feedback. A 2024 Place Standard consultation revealed a strong public desire for a more people-focused city centre. Residents highlighted issues including poor and unsafe cycle infrastructure, a lack of benches and resting places, sloped and uneven pavements creating accessibility challenges, and an overarching feeling that pedestrians and cyclists need to be given greater priority over cars.¹³

The Opportunity: The Cross Tay Link Road (CTLR) as a Game-Changer

Against this backdrop of challenge, a pivotal, once-in-a-generation opportunity is emerging. The Perth Transport Futures Project is a major infrastructure programme designed to address long-term issues of traffic congestion and pollution within the city.¹⁵ The most significant element of this is the Cross Tay Link Road (CTLR), a new bridge and road network that will allow strategic and through-traffic to bypass the city centre entirely.

Crucially, Phase 4 of the project, titled "Perth City Centre Improvements," is explicitly designed to capitalise on this change. Its entire premise is founded on the anticipated reduction in traffic that the CTLR will deliver.¹⁵ This is not simply a traffic management exercise; it is a fundamental opportunity to re-imagine and reallocate road space, shifting the purpose of city centre streets away from being primarily traffic corridors to being destinations in their own right. This strategic moment allows for the creation of a significantly improved public space environment, particularly for more sustainable modes of travel, aligning perfectly with the city's smart growth and climate action goals.

Table 1: Perth City Centre Vitality Dashboard

To provide a clear, data-driven snapshot of the current situation, the following table synthesises key performance indicators for Perth city centre, contextualised against national benchmarks. This dashboard establishes the quantitative "case for change" that underpins the strategic recommendations of this report.

Metric	Perth City Centre Data	Scottish/UK Benchmark	Source(s)
Retail Vacancy Rate (High Street)	17.8% (2023)	15.9% (Scotland, Q2 2023)	9
Footfall Trend	+68% (Mar 2024 - Jan 2025) but concerns over sustained levels	UK footfall decline of 22% (2007-2017)	11
Mode of Travel (Commute)	57% walk 5+ days/week; 41% drive 5+ days/week	N/A	18
Public Perception of Walking Safety	80% feel walking safety is 'good' (2021), fell to 67% (2023)	N/A	18
Air Quality (Nitrogen Dioxide)	Perth city centre designated an Air Quality Management Area	N/A	20

The data in this dashboard paints a clear picture. While Perth possesses a strong foundation with a high proportion of residents who walk regularly, it faces significant economic challenges evidenced by a high street vacancy rate that exceeds the Scottish average. The decline in the public's perception of walking safety between 2021 and 2023 is a concerning trend that must be addressed, and the designation of the city centre as an Air Quality Management Area underscores the environmental necessity of reducing vehicle dominance. This data collectively reinforces the urgent need for a bold, transformative strategy focused on improving the quality and safety of the pedestrian environment.

Section 1: The Pedestrian Dividend: An Evidence-Based Framework for Urban Rejuvenation

This section synthesises extensive academic research and major industry reports to build an irrefutable case for why investing in walkability is the most effective and highest-return strategy for urban rejuvenation. It provides the theoretical and empirical foundation for the specific recommendations for Perth that follow.

1.1 The Economic Imperative: The Pedestrian Pound

The core principle, robustly supported by decades of international evidence, is that well-designed, pedestrian-friendly public spaces are not a municipal cost but a powerful economic driver. High-quality public realms directly and positively correlate with increased footfall, longer visitor dwell times, and higher retail spending.²¹ This phenomenon is often referred to as "The Pedestrian Pound."

The seminal "Pedestrian Pound" report, published by the UK charity Living Streets, provides a wealth of evidence demonstrating this effect. A comprehensive review of academic studies found that shoppers who arrive on foot can spend up to six times more per month in their local centres than those who arrive by car, a function of more frequent, smaller shopping trips.¹⁷ This finding directly challenges the common misconception among retailers that car-borne customers are the most valuable. Indeed, surveys consistently show that business owners dramatically overestimate the proportion of their customers who arrive by car. A notable study in Bristol revealed that retailers estimated 41% of their customers drove, when the actual figure was only 22%.²⁴

The economic benefits are not limited to increased spending. Case studies from across the UK show a clear causal link between public realm improvements and increased commercial activity. Investment in pedestrian-friendly schemes has been shown to boost footfall by 20-35% and increase retail sales by 30% or more.¹⁷ A £10 million investment to make the Piccadilly area of Stoke-on-Trent more pedestrian-friendly, for instance, led to a 30% increase in footfall.²² Similarly, the pedestrianisation of parts of Coventry's city centre resulted in a 25% rise in Saturday footfall.²⁴

Furthermore, the economic uplift extends to property values. High-quality public realms that are safe, attractive, and accessible increase the value of both commercial and residential property.²² A detailed study in London, which used the Pedestrian Environment Review System (PERS) to quantify the quality of the walking environment, found that a measurable improvement in the streetscape could increase the sale price of flats by an average of 5% and raise retail rents by 4.9%.²⁷ This demonstrates a clear market willingness to pay a premium for walkability.

1.2 The Social & Health Imperative: Building Community and Wellbeing

Beyond the compelling economic case, streets designed for people deliver profound social and public health benefits. By reallocating space from vehicles to pedestrians, cities can foster social interaction, strengthen community bonds, and encourage healthier, more

active lifestyles.

Academic literature confirms that pedestrianisation provides public areas that are conducive to face-to-face communication and social interactions.²⁸ These chance encounters and opportunities for lingering build "social capital," increasing residents' sense of belonging, community pride, and collective ownership of their public spaces. Safe, comfortable, and accessible public realms attract more people, which in turn leads to greater "natural surveillance" or "eyes on the street," a phenomenon that improves both actual and perceived levels of safety.²⁶

The public health dividend is equally significant. Walkable environments are a direct and effective intervention to promote physical activity. Regular walking has proven benefits for both physical and mental health, reducing the risk of chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, while also boosting mental wellbeing.²⁵ With the National Health Service facing unprecedented pressures, creating environments that build physical activity into daily routines is one of the most cost-effective public health policies a local authority can pursue.

Finally, prioritising walking is a powerful tool for reducing social inequality. In the UK, a third of all households do not have access to a car, a figure that rises to two-thirds for the poorest households.²² A city centre that is difficult or unpleasant to access without a car effectively excludes a significant portion of the population. By creating a high-quality walking and wheeling environment, supplemented by accessible public transport, cities ensure that their central amenities, services, and opportunities are open to everyone, regardless of age, income, or disability.

1.3 The Environmental Imperative: A Greener, Cleaner City Core

Reducing the dominance of private vehicles in the city centre is one of the most direct and effective tools available to local authorities for tackling the climate emergency and improving the local environment.

Pedestrianisation is a proven method for mitigating the negative environmental impacts of traffic, most notably air and noise pollution.²⁸ A landmark scheme to create a car-free city centre in Madrid, Spain, resulted in a 38% reduction in nitrogen oxide levels and a 14.2% fall in carbon dioxide within the restricted zone.³² In Perth, where the city centre is already designated as an Air Quality Management Area due to pollution levels, such an intervention is not just desirable but a public health necessity.²⁰

The climate benefits are substantial. Every journey shifted from a private car to walking or cycling contributes to reducing carbon emissions. In 2021 alone, active travel across the UK was estimated to have saved 2.5 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions.²⁵ Furthermore, the reallocation of space from tarmac to green space offers additional environmental advantages. Integrating green infrastructure such as street trees, rain gardens, and pocket parks into street designs helps to mitigate urban flood risk, cools the city during heatwaves, reduces energy consumption, and provides vital habitats for wildlife.⁵

The Perth Paradox: Why is the "Pedestrianised" Core Struggling?

Given the overwhelming international evidence in favour of pedestrian-friendly environments, a critical question arises for Perth. Both Perth & Kinross Council's own 2023 retail study and the Perthshire Chamber of Commerce have highlighted the problem of high vacancy rates and a lack of vitality specifically within the "core pedestrianised part of the city centre".⁷ This presents an apparent contradiction—a paradox that must be resolved to chart a successful path forward.

If the principle of pedestrianisation is sound, then the problem must lie in its local implementation. The evidence for this comes directly from the lived experience of those who use the city centre. A series of Community Street Audits, conducted in partnership with Living Streets Scotland and local disability groups, provides a clear diagnosis.³³ These audits reveal that Perth does not yet have a truly pedestrian-first environment; rather, it has a collection of streets from which cars have been restricted, without the corresponding investment in the quality of the pedestrian experience.

The audits identified a fragmented and often poor-quality public realm. Participants noted inconsistent pavement surfaces, a lack of dropped kerbs at key junctions, poor and confusing signage, an insufficient provision of benches and resting places, and poor

connectivity between key destinations, particularly the rail and bus stations and the city's retail core.¹⁴ These deficiencies create significant barriers, especially for older people, families with pushchairs, and residents with mobility or visual impairments.

This analysis reframes the problem entirely. The issue is not that pedestrianisation has failed in Perth, but that it has not yet been fully or properly implemented. The city has taken the first step of restricting traffic but has not yet taken the second, crucial step of investing in a high-quality, coherent, and fully accessible pedestrian network. The solution, therefore, is not to reverse course and reintroduce traffic, but to complete the transformation. The challenge is one of execution, not of concept, and this presents a clear and actionable pathway for the Council and its community partners.

Section 2: Learning from Lived Experience: Case Studies in Urban Transformation

This section moves from theory to practice, analysing successful and challenging regeneration projects in other cities to derive actionable lessons for Perth. By examining how other UK cities have navigated the path to a more pedestrian-friendly core, Perth can adopt best practices, anticipate challenges, and build a robust strategy for its own transformation.

2.1 UK Precedents for Success: A Blueprint for a Walkable City

York: The UK's Most Walkable City

York's journey to becoming widely regarded as the UK's most walkable city offers a powerful lesson in long-term vision and incremental implementation. The process began in 1987 with what was then northern Europe's largest pedestrianisation scheme.³⁴ Since then, the city has consistently built upon this foundation, creating a network of "footstreets," restricting vehicle access in the historic core, and investing in new active travel infrastructure, such as the Scarborough Bridge, to improve connections between the railway station and the city centre.³⁴

The outcomes have been profoundly positive. The focus on improving the public realm is seen by local stakeholders as critical to the city's enduring economic success.³⁵ The initial pedestrianisation of key areas like Parliament Street over two decades ago is now cited as a key driver of increased trade and job creation, demonstrating the long-term return on investment.³⁵ The key lesson for Perth is that transformative change is a marathon, not a sprint. The Council's existing projects, such as the successful regeneration of Mill Street³⁶, should be viewed not as standalone schemes but as the foundational steps on a similar long-term journey towards a fully walkable city core.

Brighton: Overcoming Controversy

The experience of Brighton demonstrates how to navigate the political and commercial challenges that often accompany proposals to reallocate road space. The plan to pedestrianise parts of the city's historic Old Town was initially "controversial and contested," facing significant opposition from some business organisations who feared a negative impact on trade.³⁷ The scheme that was ultimately implemented was a compromise, reflecting the intensity of the debate.

Despite the initial friction, the outcomes were overwhelmingly positive. Post-implementation studies found a high level of public support for the changes. Traffic within the area was modestly reduced, cycling increased, and a significant portion of the public expressed a desire for the Council to extend the pedestrianisation even further.³⁹ Businesses that had initially been skeptical later reported benefits including an enhanced sense of community and improved street appeal.⁴⁰

The crucial lesson for Perth lies in the strategy for managing this process. Firstly, it is vital to anticipate and proactively address opposition, particularly from the retail sector, with robust data. The Brighton evaluation was critical in this regard, as it demonstrated that over two-thirds of visitors to the area arrived by sustainable modes of transport, with less than 3% having parked in the immediate vicinity, effectively undermining the argument that city centre vitality is dependent on car access.³⁷ Secondly, the use of trial schemes, such as the weekend-only closure of one street in Brighton, can be a powerful tool to build support by allowing businesses and residents to experience the benefits first-hand before permanent changes are made.

Manchester: An Integrated Transport and Public Realm Strategy

Manchester's approach to its city centre provides a compelling model of a fully integrated strategy. The city's transport plan explicitly aims for walking to become the main mode of travel for getting around the city centre, a goal that is directly supported by ambitious targets for reducing car journeys and city centre parking provision.⁴¹ This is not just a policy document; it is being actively implemented through major capital projects, such as the highly successful transformation of St Peter's Square from a traffic-dominated junction into a high-quality pedestrian space and public transport interchange.⁴²

To guide this investment, the city has employed sophisticated data analysis tools, such as Arup's Staterra walkability study, to objectively identify and prioritise areas for improvement based on pedestrian flows and network deficiencies.⁴³ This integrated strategy, which combines public realm enhancement with public transport improvement and traffic reduction, is viewed as essential for supporting Manchester's continued economic growth and attracting further investment.⁴⁴ The lesson for Perth is clear: a successful pedestrianisation strategy cannot be delivered in isolation. It must be the central pillar of a wider, coherent plan that integrates public transport, cycling infrastructure, and parking management. Perth's own Transport Futures Project provides the ideal framework to deliver this integrated approach.¹⁵

2.2 International Insights: Learning from the "Other" Perth

While UK examples provide the most direct comparisons, international cities offer valuable inspiration. Notably, Perth in Western Australia has pursued a regeneration strategy with several elements that are highly relevant to its Scottish namesake.

Perth, WA, has demonstrated the power of creating a strong, positive narrative around public realm improvements through specific, branded initiatives. Rather than a generic "improvement scheme," the city has an "Urban Forest Plan" with a clear goal of increasing the tree canopy, a "Forgotten Spaces – Revitalisation of Perth's Laneways" program to activate underused alleyways, and a Riverfront Masterplan to strengthen the connection between the city and the Swan River.⁴⁶ This approach creates a clear identity for the regeneration efforts, making them easier for the public to understand and support.

Furthermore, the Australian city places a strong emphasis on structured community engagement. It actively consults the public on major projects and has fostered a network of established, neighbourhood-based community groups that engage directly with the city on local initiatives, ensuring that regeneration is responsive to local needs.⁴⁸

The lessons for Perth, Scotland are direct and actionable. The concepts of an "Urban Forest Plan" and a "laneway revitalisation" program align perfectly with desires expressed by the Perth community for more nature on the streets and improvements to the city's historic vennels.¹³ Adopting a similar branded, project-based approach could galvanise public support and create a clear and exciting vision for the city's future.

Table 2: Economic Impacts of Pedestrianisation (UK Case Study Summary)

To counter the common concern that reducing traffic will harm businesses, this table provides a powerful, at-a-glance summary of the quantitative economic benefits observed in UK cities that have undertaken significant public realm improvements. This data provides a robust evidence base for local stakeholders in Perth to advocate for change.

City/Scheme	Key Interventions	Impact on Footfall	Impact on Retail Sales/Vacancy	Source(s)
Stoke-on-Trent (Piccadilly)	Widened footpaths, improved surfaces, new seating and trees	+30%	Sales increased by 30%+	22
Sheffield (Peace Gardens)	Public space reconstruction, increased pedestrian space	+35%	N/A	27
Altrincham, Manchester	Improved streets and crossing points	+25% (2010-2017)	Vacancy rate fell from 1 in 4 to 1 in 10	27
Coventry City Centre	Pedestrianisation scheme	+25% (on Saturdays)	N/A	24
London (Kensington High St)	Pavement widening, additional crossings, decluttering	+7%	12.9% increase in nearby flat sales	27

The evidence from these diverse UK cities is remarkably consistent. Well-planned investments in the pedestrian environment do not harm local economies; they stimulate them. The significant increases in footfall, and the corresponding boosts to retail performance and property values, demonstrate that creating places where people want to spend time is the most effective strategy for ensuring the long-term vitality of a city centre. This data should give businesses and policymakers in Perth the confidence to embrace a bold, pedestrian-first future.

Section 3: A Vision for Perth City Centre: From Traffic Corridor to Thriving Destination

This section articulates a cohesive, pedestrian-first vision for Perth, integrating the evidence-based principles from Section 1 and the practical lessons from Section 2 directly into the Council's existing strategic frameworks. The aim is to present a vision that is both ambitious and achievable, building upon the foundations already laid by local policymakers.

3.1 Weaving a Pedestrian-First Philosophy into the Five Quarters

The Council's Draft Perth City Centre Development and Design Framework provides a powerful spatial plan for investment, structured around five distinct "Quarters".⁶ This vision can be elevated and unified by making pedestrian priority the "golden thread" that connects them, transforming a series of individual projects into a single, coherent city centre experience.

Culture Quarter: This area is ideally suited to become a fully pedestrianised or shared-space "priority zone." The planned regeneration of the Lower City Mills into a new visitor attraction, the relocation of bus stances, the removal of the vacant toilet block, and the re-exposing of the historic Perth Lade create the perfect conditions for a vibrant, traffic-free cultural hub.⁶ Building on the success of the Mill Street regeneration, this quarter can be filled with al fresco dining, public art, and seating, creating a high-quality destination for both residents and visitors.³⁶

Station Quarter: The ambitious £15 million vision to re-expose the original Victorian station building and create a new public square in front is a landmark project.⁶ Its success hinges on its connection to the city core. This connection must be a "gold standard" pedestrian and cycle route—safe, direct, and attractive—that seamlessly guides visitors into the heart of Perth. This directly addresses a key barrier to accessibility identified in community street audits.³³ The site of the existing bus station, once redeveloped, should be prioritised for housing and enterprise spaces that are designed around active travel, not car dependency.

Mill Quarter: The new PH2O leisure centre will be a major generator of footfall, particularly for families.⁴ The walking routes connecting this new destination to the city centre and nearby parking must be designed to be safe, comfortable, and intuitive. This requires investment in high-quality, wide pavements, safe and convenient crossing points, and clear, consistent wayfinding signage.

Harbour & University Quarters: As these quarters are developed, they must be designed with high-quality active travel connectivity to the city centre from the outset. This includes ensuring the new bridge to Moncreiffe Island is a welcoming space for pedestrians and cyclists, creating new leisure and commuting routes.⁵⁰ The shared aspiration for UHI Perth to establish a city centre presence for creative industries further strengthens the case for excellent, safe, and direct pedestrian links between the campus and the city core.⁵⁰

The success of the Five Quarters plan depends fundamentally on the quality of the spaces *between* these key investment zones.

Community feedback already points to a "patchy" and disconnected walking experience across the city centre.¹⁴ If the journey between flagship projects like the new Perth Museum in the Culture Quarter and the redeveloped Station Quarter is unpleasant, unsafe, or confusing, the overall visitor experience is severely diminished, and the potential synergy between these major investments is lost. Therefore, the most critical supporting infrastructure investment is the network that connects the Quarters. A "network-first" approach is essential. A high-quality, continuous, and legible network of pedestrian-priority streets should be designed as the "golden thread" that physically and experientially binds the Five Quarters together. This elevates the plan from a series of isolated projects to a single, coherent vision for a walkable city, maximising the return on the Council's significant capital investment.

3.2 A Network of People-Friendly Streets and Spaces

Building on the Perth City Plan's existing goal of creating a hierarchy of streets and public spaces⁵, this vision proposes a practical classification system to guide the reallocation of road space.

Pedestrian Priority Streets (Gold Routes): These are the key arteries of the city centre, forming a vibrant retail and leisure spine. Streets such as the High Street, St John's Place, and George Street should be fully pedestrianised. Access for essential servicing and deliveries would be managed

through timed restrictions, for example, before 10 am and after 5 pm, a model used successfully in many UK and European cities.

Shared-Surface Streets (Living Streets): This designation would apply to streets like the regenerated Mill Street, the Old High Street, and key vennels. On these streets, pedestrians have clear priority across the entire space, but low-speed local access for residents or specific purposes is permitted. The design itself—characterised by the absence of kerbs, the use of high-quality paving materials, and the integration of street furniture—signals pedestrian dominance and naturally calms traffic.

Traffic-Calmed Neighbourhoods: The surrounding historic street grid, which contains a mix of residential and commercial properties, should be designed to eliminate through-traffic. This can be achieved through measures such as creating pocket parks, strategically placing planters, and implementing 20mph speed limits, a policy which Perth & Kinross Council is already commendably expanding.¹⁹ This protects the character of these areas while ensuring they remain accessible.

3.3 Greening the City Core: An Urban Forest for the Fair City

There is a clear desire among Perth residents for more nature and green spaces within the city centre.¹³ Drawing inspiration from the successful "Urban Forest Plan" implemented in Perth, Western Australia⁴⁷, this vision proposes a deliberate and branded strategy to increase green cover throughout the city core.

Pocket Parks & Parklets: A systematic audit of the city centre should be undertaken to identify underused spaces—such as small vacant lots, oversized road junctions, or redundant parking spaces—that can be converted into small green oases. These "pocket parks" or "parklets" provide vital spaces for rest and socialising, while improving air quality and biodiversity.

Riverfront Reconnection: The River Tay and the North and South Inches are among Perth's greatest assets. The walkways along the riverfront should be enhanced to create a high-quality linear park, strengthening the physical and visual connection between the bustling city centre and these expansive green spaces, a desire already identified in community consultations.¹³

Sustainable Urban Drainage (SUDs): New streetscape designs should integrate green infrastructure as a functional element. Features like rain gardens and permeable paving, as outlined in the Council's own design guidance, can be used to manage surface water runoff, reducing flood risk while simultaneously improving biodiversity and enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the street.⁵²

Section 4: The Community Toolkit: Empowering Local Action for a Vibrant City Centre

This section provides a practical, step-by-step guide for community-led change. The goal is to transform residents, businesses, and local organisations from passive recipients of top-down regeneration into active agents of it, fostering a sense of ownership and accelerating the pace of positive change.

4.1 Activating the Grassroots with Tactical Urbanism

The concept of Tactical Urbanism offers a powerful methodology for community action. It utilises short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions to test new ideas, demonstrate their benefits, and build momentum for long-term, permanent change.⁵³ It is, in effect, a "try before you buy" approach to urban design that empowers communities to lead the way.

Several tactical initiatives are particularly well-suited to the Perth context:

"Open Streets" Weekends: Community Councils, such as Perth Central²⁰, or a newly formed Business Improvement District could partner with the Council to trial the temporary weekend pedestrianisation of a key street, such as George Street or South Street. Using temporary barriers and signage, these events allow businesses and residents to experience the benefits of a traffic-free environment—such as increased space for outdoor dining, markets, or community activities—with minimal initial cost and commitment. This model has been used successfully worldwide to build support for permanent changes.⁵⁶

Parklet Challenge: A "Parklet Challenge" could be launched, inviting local businesses, community groups, and design students from Perth College UHI to design and install temporary "parklets." These projects convert one or two on-street parking spaces into mini public spaces with seating, planters, and art.²² They are a highly visible, low-cost way to add vibrancy, greenery, and much-needed seating to the streetscape, while demonstrating the potential for reallocating space from cars to people.

Vennel Beautification Projects: Perth's historic vennels are a unique part of its character but are often under-utilised. Groups with a focus on heritage, such as the Perth Civic Trust⁵⁸, could lead "adopt a vennel" projects. These initiatives could involve community-led clean-ups, the installation of community murals or pop-up art, and improvements to lighting to make these vital pedestrian links safer, more attractive, and more celebrated.

Community-Led Greening: There is a wealth of successful examples from across the UK of community groups transforming neglected or derelict plots of land into vibrant community gardens, allotments, or wildflower meadows.⁵⁷ Empowering local groups in Perth to undertake similar projects would directly address the public's stated desire for more green space in the city centre.¹³

4.2 Building Collaborative Capacity: Structures for Change

To be effective, grassroots energy needs to be channelled through supportive and sustainable organisational structures.

Strengthening Community Councils: Perth's network of Community Councils represents the most local tier of statutory representation.²⁰ These bodies should be equipped with dedicated placemaking toolkits, drawing on best-practice guides from organisations like Living Streets and the Town and Country Planning Association.⁶¹ Providing them with access to small seed-funding grants would empower them to move from consultation to action, initiating the kinds of tactical projects described above.

Exploring a Perth City Centre BID: A Business Improvement District (BID) is a powerful, business-led and business-funded body created to improve a defined commercial area.⁶⁴ Businesses within the BID area vote to pay an additional levy on their business rates, creating a substantial, ring-fenced budget for projects and services over and above what the council provides. These can include enhanced cleaning, security, marketing, events, and, crucially, public realm improvements.⁶⁴ Case studies from across the UK demonstrate that BIDs can be formidable agents for driving urban realm improvements, giving the business community direct ownership and control over the success of their city centre.⁶⁶ Establishing a BID for Perth City Centre would create a sustainable, long-term funding stream and a powerful partnership for delivering the vision outlined in this report.

Leveraging the Role of Civic Trusts: Organisations like the Perth Civic Trust⁵⁸ and the Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust⁶⁹ possess invaluable local knowledge and expertise. They should be engaged as key expert partners in all regeneration projects to ensure that new designs and interventions are sensitive to Perth's unique character and built heritage, acting as custodians of the city's identity.

Table 3: Community-Led Action Plan (A Phased Approach)

This table provides a practical, phased roadmap for community groups, outlining a series of escalating actions designed to build momentum, demonstrate value, and influence long-term strategic investment. It moves from low-risk "quick wins" to deeper, more influential engagement.

Phase	Timescale	Project Example	Lead Community Partner(s)	Required Resources/Support	Desired Outcome
Phase 1: Demonstration	0-6 Months	Parklet Challenge on Scott Street or South Street	Local Businesses, Perth College UHI Design Students, Perth Central Community Council	Low: Materials, Council permit waiver, promotional support.	Demonstrate public and business appetite for reallocating space; generate positive media and social media buzz.
Phase 1: Demonstration	0-6 Months	"Light Up The Lade" temporary lighting/art installation in a key vennel	Perth Civic Trust, Local Artists, Community Groups	Low-Medium: Lighting equipment, volunteers, temporary power access.	Improve perceived safety in a key pedestrian route; highlight a unique heritage asset; create a talking point.
Phase 2: Experimentation	6-18 Months	"South Street Sundays" - Trial monthly 'Open Streets' event	Perth Central Community Council, Perthshire Chamber of Commerce, potential interim BID	Medium: Professional traffic management, event insurance, marketing budget.	Collect hard data on footfall and business turnover on car-free days; build broad public support for permanent change.
Phase 2: Experimentation	6-18 Months	Community Green Space Adoption	Local residents' groups (e.g., from City South), environmental charities	Medium: Land use agreement from Council, soil/plant funding, tool library.	Transform a neglected site into a valued community asset; demonstrate community capacity for stewardship.
Phase 3: Co-Design & Influence	18+ Months	Community Co-Design Workshops for Station Square	All community groups, facilitated by Council and professional designers	High: Professional facilitation, venue hire, design materials.	Ensure the permanent, multi-million-pound Station Quarter project reflects genuine community needs and aspirations.
Phase 3: Co-Design & Influence	18+ Months	Formal BID Proposal Development	Perthshire Chamber of Commerce, city centre businesses	High: Business plan development, ballot process management, legal advice.	Establish a sustainable, business-led funding and management body for the city centre's long-term success.

This phased approach is strategic. It begins with low-risk, high-visibility projects that build confidence, skills, and political capital within the community. The success and data from these early phases then provide the evidence and public mandate needed to undertake more ambitious experiments and, ultimately, to secure a formal role in co-designing the permanent, large-scale changes that will define Perth's future. This model positions the community as a vital and constructive partner in the formal regeneration process.

Section 5: Overcoming Barriers and Building Momentum: A Strategic Roadmap

This final section provides concrete recommendations for official stakeholders—primarily Perth & Kinross Council—addressing the practical challenges of implementation. It outlines the necessary supporting strategies to ensure the pedestrian-first vision is robust, inclusive, fundable, and ultimately successful.

5.1 Integrated Transport & Access Strategy: Making it Work for Everyone

A successful pedestrian-first city centre is not an island; it depends on a carefully managed and integrated transport network that ensures seamless access for all users. The removal of through-traffic must be complemented by a clear and convenient access strategy.

Peripheral Parking Strategy: As city centre on-street and surface-level parking is gradually reduced—a key ambition for freeing up public space, as demonstrated in the Manchester city centre model ⁴¹—a coherent strategy for peripheral parking becomes essential. This involves:

Enhancing Park and Ride: Upgrading and improving the promotion of existing Park and Ride facilities to make them a more attractive option for visitors and commuters.¹³

Strategic Hubs: Considering the development of new, well-located multi-storey car parks at the edge of the city centre, designed as mobility hubs with links to public transport, bike hire, and high-quality walking routes.

Incentivising Use: A comprehensive review of parking charges is needed to create a clear price differential that incentivises the use of peripheral sites over the remaining city-centre spaces, which should be prioritised for short-stay and disabled user needs.⁷⁰

Public Transport Integration: The public transport network must be adapted to serve the pedestrianised core effectively. Bus routes may need to be reconfigured to terminate at high-quality interchanges at the perimeter of the pedestrian zone. The creation of a true, multi-modal integrated transport hub at the redeveloped Perth Station is a critical component of this strategy, improving the connection between rail and bus services.¹³ The Council's ongoing public consultation on a new public transport model for the region presents a timely and vital opportunity to align future bus services with this new city centre vision.⁷¹

Servicing and Deliveries: A clear and well-communicated system for delivery and service vehicle access is a practical necessity for businesses. This is typically managed through time-based restrictions, allowing access during off-peak hours (e.g., before 10 am and after 5 pm). This model is standard practice in successful pedestrianised zones across the UK, including York, and in many European cities.

Ensuring Full Accessibility: The principle of creating a city centre for everyone is non-negotiable. All new public realm designs must adhere to the highest standards of accessibility, developed in close and meaningful consultation with local disability advocacy groups. This includes:

Physical Infrastructure: Providing sufficient numbers of correctly designed dropped kerbs, consistent use of tactile paving at all crossing points, and ensuring clear, clutter-free footways with a minimum width to allow two wheelchair users to pass.³³

Amenities: Installing accessible public seating at regular intervals, ensuring good lighting, and providing clear wayfinding.

Parking: Retaining an adequate supply of well-located and enforced Blue Badge parking bays at the edge of the pedestrianised zones to ensure convenient access for disabled drivers.⁷³

5.2 Policy and Funding Recommendations

To translate this vision into reality, it must be embedded within the Council's formal policy and financial frameworks.

Updating Planning Guidance: The Draft Perth City Centre Development and Design Framework should be formally adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance, with the principle of a pedestrian-first network at its core.⁶ This will give the vision statutory weight, ensuring that all future private and public development proposals are legally required to contribute to its delivery.

Aligning Capital Investment: The Council should explicitly align its existing and future capital spending programmes with the delivery of the high-quality pedestrian network connecting the Five Quarters. This includes leveraging funds from the £530 million Investment Prospectus, the Place Based Investment Programme, and other regeneration budgets to prioritise the "golden thread" of public realm improvements that will unlock the full potential of the larger development projects.³

Proactive Land Assembly: Where necessary, the Council should be prepared to use its statutory powers, including Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs), to assemble the land required for key public realm and connectivity improvements. The successful use of these powers in the Mill Street regeneration project provides a clear and effective precedent for overcoming barriers posed by fragmented land ownership.³⁶

Community Action as a Tool for De-risking Investment

A central strategic argument of this report is that community-led action should be viewed as an integral part of the formal investment pipeline. The Council is actively seeking "shovel ready" projects and private investment to deliver its ambitious regeneration

programme.³ However, major public realm transformations are expensive and can be perceived as politically risky, with the potential for opposition from some business or resident groups, as the case study of Brighton illustrates.³⁷

This is where community-led tactical urbanism becomes a powerful strategic tool. Investors, whether from the public or private sector, seek to minimise risk and maximise their return. Public and political opposition represents a significant risk factor that can delay projects, increase costs, and damage reputations. The community-led initiatives outlined in Section 4—such as trial street closures or pop-up parklets—function as low-cost, real-world pilot schemes.

A successful "South Street Sunday" event, for example, does more than create a pleasant afternoon. It generates tangible data on public support, demonstrates increased footfall, and provides evidence of positive impacts on business turnover. This data effectively de-risks the much larger and more permanent investment required for a full street redesign. It proves that there is a market for the "product" being offered—a high-quality, people-friendly space—and builds the public and political buy-in necessary to proceed with confidence.

Therefore, this report strongly recommends that the Council reframe community-led tactical urbanism. It should not be seen as a peripheral "nice-to-have" activity, but as a crucial and strategic *first step* in the investment process. By actively empowering and providing seed funding for these small-scale trials, the Council can build a robust, evidence-based business case that makes its multi-million-pound "shovel ready" projects compelling, fundable, and politically secure. This positions community action as a strategic enabler of the Council's entire £530 million investment vision.

Conclusion: Perth's Future is on Foot

Perth has a profound choice to make. With the completion of the Cross Tay Link Road on the horizon, the city is presented with a unique and finite opportunity to fundamentally reshape its centre, reversing decades of car-centric planning that has eroded the quality of its public spaces and challenged its economic vitality. The city can either manage the consequences of reduced traffic passively or seize this moment to proactively and boldly reclaim the heart of the Fair City for its people.

The evidence presented in this report, drawn from academic research and the lived experience of cities across the world, is unequivocal: investing in high-quality, accessible, and vibrant walking environments delivers a powerful dividend. It boosts local economies, fosters healthier and more cohesive communities, and creates a cleaner, more sustainable environment. For Perth, this is not a matter of starting from scratch, but of completing a journey already begun. It requires moving beyond simply restricting cars to actively designing a connected network of beautiful, functional, and inclusive spaces that bind the city's ambitious regeneration projects together.

This transformation cannot and should not be a purely top-down process. The energy, creativity, and local knowledge of Perth's residents, businesses, and community organisations are the city's greatest untapped resource. By empowering these groups through tactical, community-led projects, the city can test ideas, build consensus, and create an undeniable case for permanent change. This collaborative approach, where community action strategically de-risks and informs official investment, offers the most effective and democratic path to success.

This report issues a clear call to action for a new era of partnership—a partnership between Perth & Kinross Council, the city's business community, and its empowered citizens. By working together to place pedestrians at the heart of the city's design and economy, Perth can overcome its current challenges, maximise the return on its planned investments, and secure its future as one of Europe's truly great small cities. The future of the Fair City is on foot.

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