

Muirkirk Prospectus

a new beginning

May 2001



Muirkirk Village
Location Plan

A new future for the village of Muirkirk

The Economy

Muirkirk is situated on the A70 in the valley of the River Ayr close to the edge of the East Ayrshire Council area. The village is one of the eastern gateways to Ayrshire and was once the centre of a thriving coal mining and iron

Muirkirk and a further 500 across the Cumnock and Doon Valley, about 10 miles north east of Cumnock. Over half of the primary wage earners work outside the local area with Kilmarnock and Ayr acting as the main centres of employment.

Average house prices in the Cumnock and Doon Valley are amongst the lowest in Ayrshire and prices in Muirkirk are lower still. Only 46% of households have access to a car and this is significantly below the Scottish average. Both these measures reflect the lack of wealth in the local economy.

working industry.

The last 30 years have seen a dramatic change in the economic fortunes of the village and there is now little sign of Muirkirk's industrial past.

The village has a population of around 1900 and one of the highest unemployment rates in Scotland. It has an ageing population and a quarter of the residents are over retirement age.

Most of the employment in the village is in retailing and local services, public services and open-cast coal mining. There are currently around 70 people employed in open-cast mining in and around

the economy and the community

Muirkirk therefore has a fragile economy and a community characterised by economic and social exclusion. The population has declined sharply in recent years, the village is not retaining young people and there are limited numbers of jobs in the local area. In addition, a high proportion of the population does not have access to

employment or is economically inactive.

There are no easy solutions to the problems that the village faces. Nevertheless, getting more people into work could be an achievable goal. ■

The Community

The presence of an effective community organisation representing the interests of residents and local business is a positive factor in planning future proposals for any area.

Despite the economic decline of Muirkirk, its community is strong and independent. Over the last few years it has achieved much in terms of improving the local environment and leisure facilities - including running its own 9-hole golf course.

The Muirkirk Enterprise Group was established in 1997 to build a community regeneration strategy and action plan, to develop projects and to bring together partners in the process of regenerating the

village. This group has played an important role in Muirkirk and has succeeded in attracting a considerable amount of finance for a variety of environmental projects in the village and has lobbied, often successfully for a range of causes.

However MEG has reached a stage in its development where change is required. As the scale and range of its work increases, there is the likelihood that permanent project staff will be needed to maintain momentum. Also, the present structure of the organisation must evolve into one which can hold property and undertake work while being protected from financial misfortune. ■

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The Environment



Good quality older buildings on the A70

The environment of Muirkirk undoubtedly gives the village a bad press. Initial impressions of the village from the A70 are not good and there is little to tempt the passing motorist to stop.

The run down and 'gappy' appearance of the old village, the drab Smallburn estate and the derelict character of Furnace Road are all negative factors that

require attention.

However, there is a positive side to the village environment. Much of its traditional architecture remains intact and it is a fairly 'green' settlement with strong connections to the surrounding landscape, including a picturesque setting with an abundance of mature tree planting and open space. The A70 seems to show off the least attractive side of the village and should be a main focus of attention together with the improvement of Furnace Road.

Muirkirk also needs more development to overcome the bitty appearance presented to visitors. This might include a village square which could act as a central information and refreshment stop for passers-by. ■

Leisure and Tourism

The Muirkirk Community has been very active in developing leisure and tourism facilities in and around the village. Muirkirk is the centre of an extensive network of interesting and attractive walks, particularly to the south of the village centred around the growing collection of facilities at Kames. Some of these relate to features of the industrial heritage of the area such as MacAdam's Cairn but could also include the Muirkirk Canal and other aspects of the area's industrial past. However these walks need to be

connected up into an overall plan that allows for circular tours of the village.

*the environment,
leisure and
property*

Scope also exists to expand some of the recreational and tourist facilities in the Kames area such as the golf course and the motor sport centre. The caravan site is an excellent facility for the village and there is potential to augment this through imaginative development of the Muirkirk Bing site. This would dramatically improve impressions of the village to passers-by

and provide a range of new uses with a high profile adjacent to the main road through the village. ■

The Property Market

The residential property market in Muirkirk can be described as fairly buoyant in terms of demand from within the locality. The availability of property at attractive prices appears to be the main factor behind this trend although local connections through family or employment also figure strongly.

The village is seen by some buyers as being located within reasonable commuting distance of other towns, including Glasgow. A small number of properties have been acquired as second or holiday homes perhaps reflecting a perception of the village as a pleasant rural location.

Commercial property changes hands only

occasionally and a lack of start-up capital on the part of prospective retailers means that rental is a more attractive option initially. There appears to be little demand for industrial nest units despite a relatively low annual rental.

The village has a good range of development opportunities with potential for a variety of uses including the re-use of older buildings, some of which have either historic or architectural quality and character. With a constantly improving environment, good recreational facilities and more effective marketing, it may be easier in the future for developers and purchasers to make the leap of faith and move to Muirkirk. ■

A Community Process

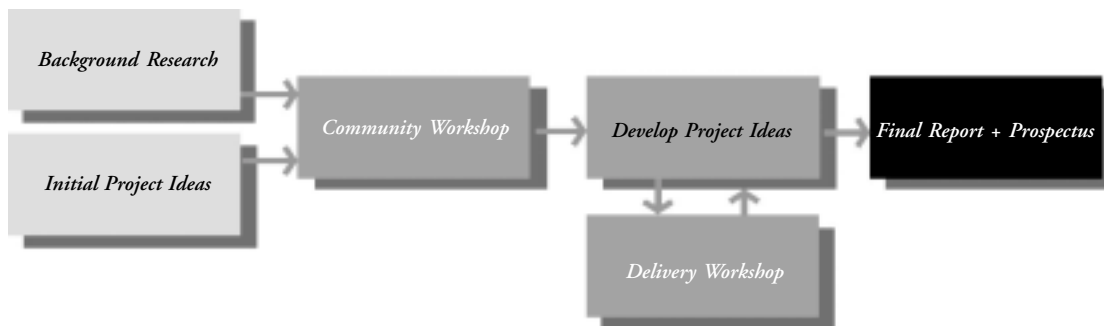
At a workshop attended by over 80 people held in August 2000 the community discussed the main issues facing the village. They assessed the performance of Muirkirk in terms of its economy, community and environment, rating these respectively as fragile, robust and stable. Ideas for the future of Muirkirk were also discussed. Building on earlier work done by the Corrom Trust, a broad range of projects was assessed, given priority and considered as short, medium or long-term ideas. New projects were also suggested.

The list of projects was then tested to see how each would affect the income, retention and leakage of money in the village economy as well as the creation of local jobs. Each project was scored against

these criteria. A newsletter was published and distributed locally giving the results of this session. At a later date, relevant public bodies were involved in a delivery workshop to indicate how they might contribute to the projects. Finally, ideas on the form of organisation to take this programme forward were discussed at a presentation to local people.



The Study Process



Community Workshop in Muirkirk

The Social Economy

The economy of any small settlement is determined by three factors namely: business, finance and funding, and the social economy. These factors interact to make up the economic life of the area.

While we are used to talking about the economy of an area and about the system of finance that underpins it, such as banks and building societies, we are less used to talking about the social economy - the network of interactions that communities undertake in their social life and in which services and goods are exchanged and wealth retained within the community.

In general, the business economy and its

financial support is about the creation of wealth while the social economy is about the retention of wealth so that it does its work within the community.

The strategy for Muirkirk is to marry the business and social economies so that they support each other and this is reflected in the choice of projects on the following pages.

Most of these are traditional employment creation, environmental or development proposals such as Connecting to Local Jobs, the East Ayrshire Trail or a New Village Centre. However, some are specifically targeted at improving the social economy, the aim being to build on the community's undoubted strengths.

Proposals

these proposals were developed through workshops with the village community



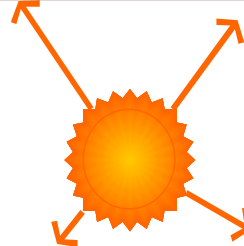
Connecting to Jobs

One of the few sources of new jobs in the immediate future may be from new open cast mining sites.. New sites in Glenbuck and Burnfoot Moor could bring about 100 jobs into the local area. These could be an important source of local jobs. A 'Connecting to Local Jobs' project would improve the ability of Muirkirk residents to access and retain these jobs by providing customised training and interview guarantees.



Job Opportunities

Job opportunities in the Muirkirk area are limited. Many people in the Cumnock and Doon Valley have to commute out of the local area to work. Kilmarnock and Ayr are important centres of employment. Muirkirk, however is isolated from these, particularly by public transport. This project would consider innovative ways to connect local residents with employment opportunities outwith the local area.



New Networks

Muirkirk has had to face up to the challenges brought about by the loss of its traditional economic base. There is some concern that the gains made in the last few years could be lost as a result of loss of momentum. This initiative would aim to stimulate the interests of the Muirkirk Enterprise Group by forming links with other villages such as Sanquhar, Wigtown or Dalmellington in order to share experience, ideas and insights.



Village Centre

Muirkirk currently lacks a square, focus or arrival point which would be the natural starting point for visitors to the village. Such a feature could act as a meeting and information point possibly linked to the Inn near the road to the caravan site, golf course and sprint track. It would provide an orientation point for village facilities.



Furnace Road looking towards Muirkirk



Muirkirk Welcome

Muirkirk has a number of visitor attractions in and around the village. These may not be 'punching their weight' in terms of generating economic benefit for the village. The Muirkirk Welcome would aim to increase economic benefits to local businesses from visitors through events, improved signage and shop fronts and developing services offered in shops, bars and restaurants.



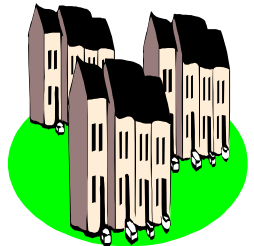
East Ayrshire Trail

Muirkirk has a rich history and is in the heart of rural East Ayrshire. MEG has played a key role in developing visitor attractions in the town, and has produced a range of marketing material. Nevertheless the village continues to under-perform in terms of attracting visitors. This project aims to develop Muirkirk's links with other visitor attractions and routes in East Ayrshire.



Gapsite Development

Old Muirkirk has numerous areas of vacant ground and gap sites which detract from the appearance of the village and the area between the old village and Smallburn requires more development. Promoting these sites together with securing new uses for older buildings would reduce the air of decay and create a better impression for passers-by along the A70.



New Link Housing

While there may currently be little demand for new homes, increasing the village population would be a worthwhile goal. The development of housing on larger areas of land, particularly between the old village and Smallburn, would unite the village, benefit the community and local shopping facilities as well as improve the appearance of the village.

for Muirkirk



Village Woodland

Muirkirk has a pleasant landscape setting but is rather more exposed to the elements than neighbouring settlements. A new landscape plan that concentrated on increasing tree cover, creating better views, improving wildlife habitats and providing settings for new recreational facilities would be a long term but worthwhile project.



Landscaping

The quality and amount of landscaping in the village, particularly along main streets, needs to improve. The emphasis should be on street tree planting and creating avenues of trees which will help to unify the street scene.



Garden Centre

There may be an opportunity to develop a garden centre beside the A70 through the village. This could have a café and perhaps a craft outlet for local produce. Such a facility would encourage motorists to stop and would provide an opportunity to promote other facilities in the village. Muirkirk Bing would be the best area for this development.



Local Intertrading

Firms throughout the wider East Ayrshire area may have more to offer each other than they realise. Modern communications make it easy to select the lowest price from anywhere in the country. There may be wider benefits in terms of employment and recirculation of money by encouraging local businesses to trade with each other.

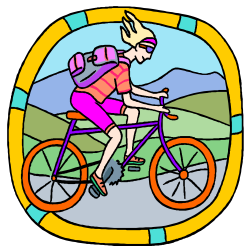


Muirkirk Golf Club



Hill Climb Track

The Kames sprint track is an important feature of the Scottish Motor Sport scene but its use is relatively limited at present. Expansion of the facility to include a hill climb track would increase numbers of visitors and would respond to a market need in Scotland brought about by the closure of other hill climb facilities.



Cycle and Footpaths

The development of footpath and cycleways that not only surround the village but connect to larger strategic networks would help to increase the numbers of people visiting the area and allow Muirkirk to tap into an increasingly popular activity. The promotion of these facilities on a national basis is also important.



18 Hole Golf Course

Extending the golf course to 18 holes would increase the opportunities for visitors and help to build a larger core of attractive recreational facilities at the village. This may require land acquisition and substantial investment but would help to put Muirkirk on the recreational map of East Ayrshire.



Links to Kames

Most of the tourism and leisure facilities in Muirkirk are detached from the village itself and there is a need for better connections and signage between the village centre and Kames as well as environmental improvements. This would help to draw attention to the excellent recreational facilities on offer to the passing motorist.

Social Economy Projects

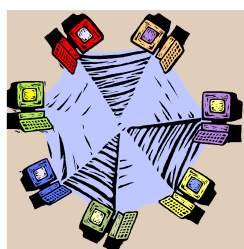
The Net Effect

The proposals put forward below capitalise on the strong community spirit in the village. They are projects in which local people can take a direct part and which will help to strengthen the ability of the village to retain the benefits created by more traditional approaches.

The list has been designed so that projects support each other - it is the combination of ideas

that will produce the best results for the village - and the *linking* of all the proposals shown is itself a project - the Net Effect - and has been given an appropriate budget.

The community company will be an important element in drawing all this together, in collaboration with the appropriate agencies, the private sector and the community itself. ■



Local Net

A local web site can often trigger interaction between firms and potential customers both locally and world wide. Other areas of Scotland have found that this can lead to greater local intertrading, external sales and expanded community activities.



Shop Local Campaign

Locally owned retail is one of the most effective means of retaining wealth in a community. If a community shops elsewhere, it transfers its spending power and local traders suffer - and so does the community as it loses basic retail facilities.



Community Company

MEG is unincorporated and thus leaves its members exposed in its financial dealings or in employing people. It may have problems with funders who prefer to deal with a legal entity. A company limited by guarantee can address such problems.



LETS Scheme

A Local Exchange Trading Scheme uses the skills and services inherent in the community to stem leakage from the local economy. LETS have been used throughout the UK in areas suffering from economic decline.

Project Assessment

The assessment of the proposals considered at the workshop together with the social economy projects outlined above suggested that the most beneficial effects on the village are likely to be derived from the adoption of the 1st tier projects listed below as a solid way forward and a focus for community effort.

- new woodland framework around the village
- developing new networks
- gap site development
- new village centre
- expanding the golf course to 18 holes
- increasing local intertrading
- the local net
- 'shop local' campaign
- the net effect

2nd tier projects would be:

- new link housing
- cycle and footpath networks
- the East Ayrshire Trail
- the Muirkirk Welcome
- accessing job opportunities
- a community company
- a LETS project

3rd tier projects are:

- connecting to local jobs
- a hill climb track
- improved links with Kames
- landscape structure within the village ■



The Heritage Lay-by

Muirkirk Limited: a community company

In order to advance the programme of projects shown on the previous pages, Muirkirk has decided to set up its own company, controlled by the local community. This brings together all the interests in the village in the common effort for its improvement.

This company will be "limited by guarantee", which means that its members - local people and businesses - will each be liable for a small sum (£1.00) should it be wound up with debts. The membership of this company is open to all

people who live in the village. One third of the Board of the company, initially drawn from the members of the existing Muirkirk Enterprise Group, will be subject to election every year by the members.

The company will be able to hold property and to employ people, such as a project manager or secretary, to further its aims.

Initially, the company will not be charitable. As its activities increase however, there may justification for applying for charitable status to allow contributions from other charities, and to act in the most financially efficient manner.

The business plan for the company will explore these matters in detail and will consider the precise legal structure and membership of its initial Board. First among the priorities for the new organisation is a membership drive to ensure that as many local people as possible are signed up. The future of Muirkirk rests in the hands of its community. ■



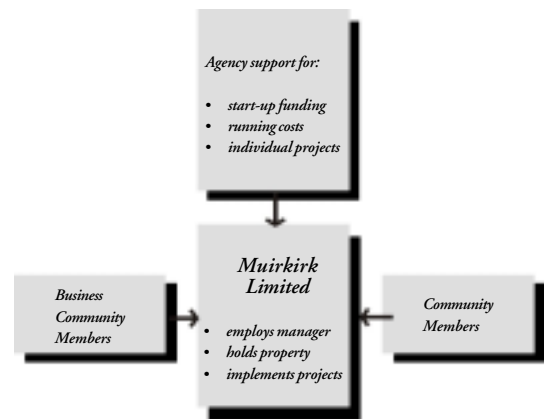
Muirkirk Caravan Site

The Prospectus

This document is a result of a study carried out for Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire and the Muirkirk Enterprise Group by Willie Miller Urban Design.

It describes future projects for the village which have been developed in association with the community and suggests ways in which they can be implemented.

Muirkirk Village



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