

Falkirk

The best Walking Neighbourhood in the UK¹

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Walkability is an essential environmental consideration in age-friendly and sustainable city development initiatives (Moran et al., 2014). In the past couple of decades, many city authorities in Europe have focused on improving walkability of their urban districts. Recently, a Scottish town called Falkirk was named Britain's Best Walking Neighbourhood 2019.² Falkirk was selected from 80 nominations by a panel of expert judges and 12,000 public respondents. This case study explores the context and stories that brought Falkirk its recognition and describes its key walkability features.

Background

In the 18th and 19th century, Falkirk was famous for iron and steel industry supported by an internal canal corridor, roads and motorways. Currently, Falkirk hosts 35,168 inhabitants within an area of 11 square kilometres where retail and services are two main economic activities.

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² See, [https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/falkirk-walking-neighbourhood-scotland-ramblers-urban-hike-a8999426.html)

[advice/falkirk-walking-neighbourhood-scotland-ramblers-urban-hike-a8999426.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/falkirk-walking-neighbourhood-scotland-ramblers-urban-hike-a8999426.html)

Planning for walkability has been a priority in Falkirk in the past few decades, evident in the pedestrianization of High Street, one of the main streets in Falkirk Town Centre.

Key Walkability Features

The Local Development Plan 2 (LDP2) 2018 by the local authority, Falkirk Council, considers 'good placemaking' as a central spatial strategy. Central to placemaking is walkability, which is implemented through three key built environment features: unique attractions, attractive and signposted paths, and access to enjoyable green spaces.

Expanding Attractions *Unparalleled*

Since 2000, new destination attractions such as the Falkirk Wheel, Helix Park and Kelpies have been added to expand the list of walk-to places in the town.

The Falkirk Wheel

The Falkirk Wheel is the only rotary canal connector in the world.

Box 1: The Falkirk Wheel



Source: Scottish Canals (2018).
<https://www.scottishcanals.co.uk>. Accessed 24 Oct 2019.

It is a rotating boat lift that takes advantage of three existing canals (Forth Canal, Clyde Canal and Union Canal) by connecting them for seamless movement of boats. Built in 2002, the £78 million wheel is a key landmark in Falkirk.

The Kelpies at the Helix Park

The Helix Park, completed in 2014, is a 350-hectare greenspace development on a brownfield site. The development includes performance areas, water sports, play areas and two 100-foot high and 300-ton equine steel sculptures known as the Kelpies. Taking eight and half years from conceptualization to installation, the Kelpies are the work of celebrated Scottish sculptor, Andy Scott to commemorate the Clydesdale horses that worked hard along the canal during the industrial years (McKean, Harris, & Lennon, 2017).

Box 2: The Kelpies at the Helix Park



Source: (Top) Lenni Coffey (2019).
<https://www.independent.co.uk>. Accessed 24 Oct 2019.

Well-maintained Signposted Paths

There are 383 miles of well-maintained sign-posted walkways in Falkirk. Most of the walkways are easy going and suitable for families with children and older adults. Users have described these paths

as ‘fantastic place to get around on foot’.³ Among the attractive and natural walking routes, Antonine Wall, John Muir Way and Callendar Park are the most notable.

Box 3: Local Streets

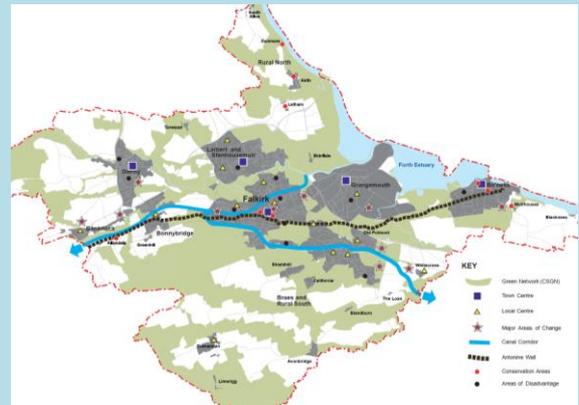


Source: Falkirk Council LDP2, 2018, P. 07. <https://www.falkirk.gov.uk>. Accessed 14 Nov 2019.

Antonine Wall

The Antonine Wall is a World Heritage Site. It is a part of the historic path that dates to 142AD when Romans first started constructing massive barriers across Scotland. The path offers a way to explore various towns including Falkirk, e.g. Rough Castle, Kinneil Estate, Polmonthil, Callendar Park, Seabags Wood and Waiting Lodge.

Box 4: Antonine Wall



Source: Falkirk Council LDP2, 2018, P. 15. <https://www.falkirk.gov.uk>. Accessed 14 Nov 2019.

John Muir Way

John Muir Way, completed in 2014, is a 134 miles long-distance path across central Scotland.

Box 5: The Bear sculpture at John Muir Way



Source: BBC (19.11.2019) <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-50476004>. Accessed 22 Nov 2019.

The path was conceptualised in 2010 by Keith Geddes, Chair of Central Scotland

³ See, <https://www.falkirkherald.co.uk/news/people/st>

[p-out-and-explore-falkirk-s-wonderful-walks-1-5004928](https://www.falkirkherald.co.uk/news/people/st)

Green Network. The path consists of walking and cycling routes supported by bus and train route and passes through Falkirk and Linlithgow. Parts of the path are suitable for horse riding as well. On 19 November 2019, a 5-meter tall steel sculpture of a bear has been installed near the Spott Roundabout at Dunbar to honour the Scottish conservationist, John Muir.

Callendar Park

The 170 acres Callendar Park is a scenic landscape of natural and man-made features.

Box 6: Callendar Park



Source:

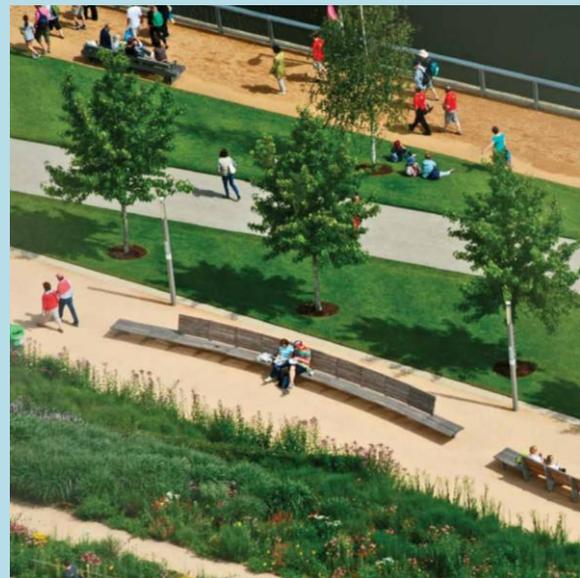
<https://www.falkirkcommunitytrust.org/venues/callendar-park/>. Accessed 24 Oct 2019.

The park allows walkers to enjoy a newly opened Roman Fort themed playpark, focused on young walkers, and the historic Callendar House. The unique landscape design of the park is included in the inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes in Scotland.⁴

Access to Green Spaces

Currently, every house in Falkirk is within 400m from an open space. The Falkirk Council started the Falkirk Greenspace Initiative in 1993. The vision is to create continuous, well-wooded parkland around the town, with circular walking and cycling ring route through the parkland.

Box 7: Olympic Park by LDA Design



Source: The Landscape Institute (2013, P.28).

By 2013, more than 260 kilometres of the ring route have been built or upgraded, 1.3 million trees planted, more than 100 green space projects and 340 community events implemented (The Landscape Institute, 2013). These projects have been successfully implemented under an integrated landscape framework for new business and recreational interests. Local council services and local communities have been involved to identify, design, and manage the green spaces that contribute to the quality of life of the

⁴ See, <https://www.visitscotland.com/info/see-do/callendar-park-p252641>

inhabitants. Ninety-two per cent of Falkirk residents think that their neighbourhood is a good place to live in.⁵

Planning and Future Projects

The Falkirk Council has prepared a Local Development Plan (LDP) in 2015 and a revised LDP2 in 2018 to guide the future use and development of land from 2014 to 2034⁶. The Plan envisions Falkirk as ‘a dynamic and distinctive area at the heart of Central Scotland’ with three interconnected themes - thriving communities, growing economy, and sustainable place. Spatial strategies are developed for sustainable housing, infrastructure, business development, town centres, green network, cultural heritage and sustainable access. Among the initiatives, the council is planning to construct an aerial bridge to help pedestrians and cyclists safely cross the intersection of four major roads.

Box 8: Aerial Pedestrian Bridge at Busy Road Intersection



Source: Kirsty Paterson (2006).
<https://www.falkirkherald.co.uk/news>
 Accessed 24 Oct 2019.

The bridge would have four swirling ramps, for people with bikes, prams and wheelchairs along with stairs for able pedestrians.

Summary

In summary, the three key features of Falkirk – reportedly the most Walking Neighbourhood in the UK are: unique attractions, well-maintained paths with signposts, and ease of access to green spaces. The process of materialising these walkability features in Falkirk highlights the importance of consistent vision, holistic plans and collaborative actions by relevant city authority.

While the broad walkability features of walkable environment such as creating unique attractions, developing sign posted path network and ensuring access to green spaces seem to be applicable in many other cities, the Falkirk case also shows consideration of contextual and cultural sensitivity in spatial design, evident in the design of the Kelpies and Bear sculptures. This suggests a need to understand and take account of local circumstance and heritage when designing walkable environment.

Sources:

McKean, A., Harris, J., & Lennon, J. (2017). The Kelpies, the Falkirk Wheel, and the tourism - based regeneration of Scottish Canals. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 19(6), 736-745.

Moran, M., Van Cauwenberg, J., Hercky-Linnewiel, R., Cerin, E., Deforche, B., &

⁵ See, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070822222642/http://www.myfuturesinfalkirk.co.uk/Investment/pdf/falkirklocation.pdf>

⁶ See, <https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/planning-building/planning-policy/local-development-plan/plan-two>

Plaut, P. (2014). Understanding the relationships between the physical environment and physical activity in older adults: a systematic review of qualitative studies. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 11(79).

The Landscape Institute. (2013). *Green infrastructure: An integrated approach to land use*. In G. Bull (Ed.).