Perspectives – 25 WORDS FOR ‘25: A Collective Poem by the People of Stirling to Mark Stirling’s Bid for UK City of Culture 2025

Laura Fyfe, Lesley Wilkinson, Chris Kane and Kevin Harrison
As part of Stirling’s bid to become UK City of Culture 2025, Stirling Makar Laura Fyfe joined forces with Scene Stirling (https://scenestirling.com/) to invite everyone across the area, from Cowie to Crianlarich, to unleash their creativity and share their twenty-five words for 2025. As the city’s leading poet, Laura sought 25-word contributions from local people (sentences, lines, and phrases) for a collective poem celebrating Stirling’s rich culture and creative spirit.

Launching the campaign in December 2021, Laura said:

Every single one of us is a vital part of Stirling’s culture. Our thoughts, our actions, our voices are the heart of our communities. The 25 for ’25 poem will reflect this. It’s a funnel through which to channel our thoughts; a lens through which to focus our ideas; a loudspeaker through which to amplify our voices. Here’s a chance to create something together, to focus on what we love about this amazing place we live in. I can’t wait to hear from you all, especially those of you who’ve never published a poem before!

To help get ideas flowing, Laura hosted an online poetry writing workshop and recorded a video guide to inspire budding writers. All ages and abilities were encouraged to get involved in the project, with Stirling schools being sent digital poetry packs to get them started. The campaign attracted over 100 entries, which were woven together by Laura into one poem which was then created into a short film to accompany Stirling’s official bid submission in February 2022.
Kin Kennings

A collective poem by the people of Stirling woven together by Laura Fyfe, city Makar, 2022.

either the snowy north
nor the rainy south
nor the brisk east
nor the windy west
but this well-weathered heart

sharp cliffs crumbling
spring-fed lochs
fertile green
land enfolded
by rising hills
dominated by what
the sky brings

we gather together
around one castle
stand steadfast in quiet
defiance, the wolf cry echoes
around the warps and wefts of streets
in village quiet, town hive,
city bustle, founded
on the dark solidity of coal
mined by dusty hands
there’s no limit to what we might

build with the boldness of stone
dykes, cobbles, wynds
the castle sill, warm like hearth,
like kin, like sunlight flecks
upon the skin

a moment, valiant in nostalgia
a painting hung still, its frame
richly gilded by history
loud in its knowledge of times
before, everchanging, ever
growing but its essence
endures
history floats past
the Teith to the Forth
under bridges, over sunshine
sparkling peaty pebbles
through calming lades,
and forest glimmers of green
tomorrows, in a looping silver ribbon
that meets itself

returning salmon flash, seal heads bob
heron flies over
robin song and red-squirrel dash
over mist lying in layers
over the carse, hills
breach into sunlight
quiet beauty
on the horizon
fresh air reaching to

freedom
to love and be loved
nourished, in hardship,
by the kindness of neighbours
a baby cries, a Rose
grows, roots sink,
a home settles, opens
to laughter from afar
the bloom of blossom trees
and the red flowered hawthorn
breath taken

when the weather
withers you stay
inside, you stay
with pride, happy knowing
adventures await

jam sandwiches and the tang of the angels
share the countryside, our
playground, ample time
to wander, exhale, live

sketch out pathways
footprint them into glens of memory
bike trail them into mountainous joy
paddle ripples in ice-watery peace

hold them close, by eye, by lens
instant portraits, landscapes
posted up and woven, through screens
streaming into the fabric of the world
welcoming strangers
never strangers for long
feel the buzz of the thump
of rounded leather, footballs
kicked on grass into goals
into castle rafters
behind glass
stretching legs

stretching minds, a flow
an outpouring of thoughts
rain of notes, catch them on your tongue
and taste the sighs
playing the breath of crowds
feet stomping, hands clapping
floors vibrating like the skin of drums

concerts on our streets
in carparks and fields
theatre on every doorstep, through
every window curtains open to stories
untold, journeys ready to unfold
new chapters, open books, words of
the people
always
the people

Stirling’s children, these
sons and daughters of the rock
sculpted with love, anchored safe
from our stronghold
we take flight into the future
firework flashbulb launch
of hope turning Scotland to the new,
from this, its well-weathered heart.

**Perspectives on the Bid**

**Laura Fyfe: Reflections on “Kin Kennings”**
As Stirling’s Makar (poet laureate), when I was asked for suggestions of ways we could involve poetry in the bid for the UK City of Culture, I had no idea that the collation of the “25 Words for ‘25” that people submitted would become central to our proposal. I am immensely grateful to have had the chance to work on a poem of this scale and scope. What was key was that this collective poem had the potential to involve voices from across the Stirling area. The resulting poem, “Kin Kennings”, is a representation of what people from a huge geographical area, from a wide range of urban and countryside environments, love about where we live.

“Kin Kennings” represents nostalgia for our past, memories built over time spent in musical and artistic venues, as well as our hopes for what's yet to come. One of the most touching stories behind the poem was the word “Rose” that features in the poem – the name of the first baby born to a family who have settled in Stirling. It was a huge honour and – fairly daunting responsibility – to stitch these personal thoughts and experiences together in such a way as to do Stirling’s people and places justice.

The advantages of writing “Kin Kennings”, we continue to benefit from. Stirling's bid for City of Culture acted as a rousing call which brought together organisations and creative communities across Stirling to contribute towards our collective future.

We’re currently working on a celebration of Stirling’s 20th anniversary of having achieved City status: through an upcoming poetry trail that will feature in our City’s app. Stirling Council invited, from Stirling’s people, suggestions of places within the City that they hold as special – particularly those that people might not be so aware of, hidden nooks, sanctuaries away from stereotypical urban bustle. I then toured these and used their What 3 Words coordinates as the basis for individual poems set at each
location. Again – we’re using technology, community involvement, and poetry to celebrate our beautiful home and showcase it to our lucky residents and visitors.

Lesley Wilkinson: An Ode to My Home City

As someone who grew up in Stirling, working on the “25 words for ’25” project was – as cheesy as it sounds – a labour of love. I was lucky enough to work alongside talented filmmaker Bill Bruce, who shares my passion for Stirling. Together with Makar Laura Fyfe, we translated the words of the people into what we hope is a moving short film. It was important to me, both personally and professionally, for the film to reflect the essence of Stirling, not just be a literal translation of every line in the poem – although the filming locations were carefully chosen to reflect the themes raised in the text. Incredibly we shot all the scenes with the Makar Laura in one day, racing between locations (from city art gallery to village hub) – lugging the filming kit up 246 steps to the top of the Wallace Monument before it closed for the night, was nearly the end of the project and us!

Stirling is a gift to filmmakers and marketeers with its majestic castle, monument, and spectacular panoramic scenery. But what I hope the film conveys is that Stirling is more than a pretty postcard tourist town. In the shadow of the Castle is a city (and shire) bustling with life. Our identity might be rooted in history (think William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots), but we’re constantly evolving. Like the River Forth which flows through it, the film conveys that Stirling is a city forever in motion. A place that embraces the future, that isn’t stuck in the past. Hopefully, the film also...
shows that Stirling is an innovative place where digital, creativity, climate action, heritage, industry, and learning converge. A place where creative careers begin and develop. A place that offers the best of city and country life. A place where old and new intertwine.

Stirling is a city that embraces diversity and recognises its responsibility to ensure that everyone shares in the wealth of cultural opportunities that Stirling has to offer. The city’s distinctive communities are key to its cultural and civic identity, from the Big Noise musicianship project in Raploch to coal mining legacy community arts projects in Fallin – both of which feature in the film. We might not have been crowned UK City of Culture this time around, but I hope the video and poem give an insight into what an incredible city Stirling is. We’re ambitious without losing sight of our local priorities. We’re all looking forward to beginning a new chapter in Stirling’s history as we emerge from the bidding process and develop the city’s new cultural strategy.

Chris Kane: Unleashing Stirling’s Cultural Potential

Figure 3. Stirling Council Leader Chris Kane

A key part of our City of Culture bid was widening participation and unleashing Stirling’s full cultural potential, so “25 words for ‘25” was a wonderful way for the people of Stirling to channel their inner creative spirit and put their own stamp on the bid. There was a fantastic response from communities to this imaginative and collaborative project with people of all ages across the wide geographical area of Stirling getting involved. As someone born in Stirling and who still lives here, it was
fascinating to see all the different cultural perspectives of the area from our residents and what they love most about their communities. Laura did a superb job weaving all these voices together into an inspiring and uplifting poem that demonstrated the diversity and dynamism of Stirling’s current cultural scene as well as a desire and belief that we can do so much more.

Seeing the poem projected onto the National Wallace Monument as the centrepiece of the bid submission was a celebration of Stirling’s passion and creativity and a visible statement that we were ready to open an exciting new chapter in Stirling and Scotland’s history. That ambition hasn’t changed.

Figure 4. Poem Projected onto the National Wallace Monument

The words of the poem were projected onto the Wallace Monument in a spectacular light display to mark the submission of the bid for UK City of Culture 2025. See "Illuminating the Wallace Monument: Stirling Submits Bid for UK City of Culture 2025".


Our work is ongoing at harnessing this creativity, talent and energy to unleash Stirling’s full cultural potential so we can improve lives of people in our communities and indeed across the whole of Scotland. Our bid was drawn from the passion and support of grassroots communities, artists, and residents. We continue to work alongside them and other creative organisations to reimagine our cultural offer and to nurture our local, creative talent.

Kevin Harrison: What Is a City of Culture?

Figure 5. Kevin Harrison, Manager of Scene Stirling and Part of Stirling’s Bid Team
What is a 'City of Culture'? It's a question that no doubt many places have wrestled with as they have considered entering the UK contest, which has grown round on round. The awarding of the title has been linked to significant programme and infrastructure investment, high press visibility and has led to distinctive and vibrant mass programming in usually large cities with challenging social and economic needs. Every city that takes part has passion, talent and ideas, but has also started a conversation with itself about how it values arts, heritage, culture, and its own identity and how it is perceived nationally and internationally. With a longer process for the UK City of Culture 2025 selection, a diverse range of cities and regions had this conversation. Stirling being one of them.

Stirling has always been a stunning place to visit, with its majestic castle and rolling hills, looking over the winding Forth. Its culture is inspired by this, but far more by its people and communities, many rural, others connected around arguably the most beautiful university campus in the UK, and still others in villages that were connected by industries such as coal mining and textiles. Its military history is self-evident in the barracks and walls that hold its cultural venues in place. With incredible social art projects such as Big Noise Raploch, to its support for its lead poet, the Stirling Makar, there is much to celebrate.

Stirling has not always spoken up for itself, seen its arts and culture as the lifeblood that pumps underneath its incredible heritage, or even believed it could stand up and be a City of Culture. Something changed in that process. The initial responses to being longlisted were typical, with other cities such as Dundee and Paisley having journeyed this route before unsuccessfully, there was a chance to be the first Scottish UK City of Culture and learn from their attempts. As the conversations started, a real energy and sense of self-belief began to grow. For Stirling, a bid for the title galvanised and
inspired plans for culture-led regeneration and inclusion. All neighbourhoods and parts of Stirling would be part of the plans, would have their say, and the year would work to use culture and the arts as catalyst for social change. To enhance the equity of our diverse neighbourhoods and tell a story of Stirling, less rooted in the past, rather focused on the future.

As partners gathered and aspirations grew, the need for a way to connect everyone in Stirling to the bid came to the fore. How better than through the rhythms and power of a collective poem. 25 words woven like a spell by the Makar. Words collected from across the land were then cast onto The Wallace Monument as a song. The beacon visible for miles from the city was lit up with potential, and the words of the people had power as Stirling saw its own future in a bid, that regardless of outcome, would set out a path for change and transformation to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

Shining a spotlight on Stirling’s collaborative poem to mark the city’s culture bid. An analysis of the ‘25 words for 25’ project from four perspectives: Makar (poet), film director, council, and bid team.

Mise en lumière du poème collectif rédigé dans le cadre de la candidature de la ville de Stirling pour le titre de ville britannique de la culture 2025. Nous présentons ici une analyse de « 25 mots pour 2025 » sous quatre perspectives, celle du Makar (le poète officiel), celle d’un réalisateur, celle de la municipalité et celle de l’équipe chargée de la candidature.

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