PEOPLE who love Tonypandy remember when the town buzzed – the days when this was the crossroads where everyone passed through, when Father Christmas appeared on the roof of Woolworths and shoppers packed the town.

Today, there are more challenges. Many drive past the town not through it any more. Yet one thing remains the same – the love. Recently I reviewed newly-owned Indian restaurant the Red Rose and the response I got was surprising. Not because everyone loves a great Indian – though, who doesn’t? – but because it was something nice written about Tonypandy and there was a collective appreciation for that.

The reason is that for ages people have spoken about Tonypandy like it’s a ghost town. This is made worse by its seemingly constant appearance on UK’s “worst” retail areas list. In February it appeared yet again on ABC Finance’s report into the decline of the high street.

It may not be like it used to be, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing there – far from it. In the 0.6 miles of high street – namely Dunraven Street and Llwynypia Road – there are new and old shops, salons and a coffee shop or two.

The local library has just reopened after a £185,000 investment – £120k of which was from the Welsh Government’s Museums, Archives and Libraries Division, and a further £65,000 contribution from the council’s RCT Invest Programme – which saw it create a new IT suite for adult education, a disabled toilet, a new community room and creative space for local projects.

Last year 35 local businesses took advantage of RCT council’s Town Centre Maintenance Grant of £50,000 to improve their frontage and last month the decision was made to roll out free Wi-Fi across the area’s towns.

These investments can only be a good thing, but what of the people who actually spend their days, weeks and months working in Tonypandy?

There are some who decry the decline of the high street, sure, but there are plenty who feel the opposite and are hungry for Dunraven Street to rediscover its purpose.

And in the town where the coalminers were so determined to get fair pay during the strikes of 1910-12, why shouldn’t there still be a fire to be stoked for a better Pandy?

Two long-term Tonypandy characters are Nikki Gregory and her colleague Sue, at the Pandy Cards shop, which still has the awesomely retro signage from the 1980s – they’ve seen Dunraven Street change immeasurably since working there, 30 years back.

“I was gutted when I read that list again, says Nikki. “I thought, ‘Oh no not again.’ It makes you feel ashamed. And it sounds worse when it’s in print, it’s quite damming.’

Sue, who didn’t want to give her surname, hopes that people will change their attitude towards Tonypandy.

“You have to remember people’s shopping habits have changed, it’s country-wide,” she adds: “If people have that attitude and they’re not going to come, it’ll just continue to go down and down and down and there’ll be nothing left. And when they want something they’ll be asking, ‘Why is everything shut?’ If they haven’t been coming to do shopping in the town then it will shut.”

But Sue is positive that the recent changes to the high street will have an impact. In the autumn of 2018 the pedestrianised Dunraven Street was opened back up to traffic.

“Since the road has opened up it’s a town centre again,” she adds. “Our biggest problem now is the banks shutting... but there’s nothing you can do about that.

“It feels nice again. When it was pedestrianised you had long blocks where you wouldn’t see anyone, particularly after lunch. But now, because it’s open, they will come through.

“People will go, ‘Oo, I can go to Pandy Cards now and stop.’

“It went at one time it was awful on Saturday, but now it’s picked back up. You have one or two people saying, ‘What have they spent all this money for?’ and we tell them it has made it better.

“Come and support us and see if you can revive us. It’s what we need.”

With regard to the Barclays and Santander banks leaving Tonypandy, it’s a blow, but, as Sue points out, that decision, sadly, has been made.

Nikki adds: “Let’s just hope that they will use the Post Office instead to do their business. I’m not