



# Your Town Audit: Alexandria

March 2016



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Report produced by:



Audit Date: 12/01/2016

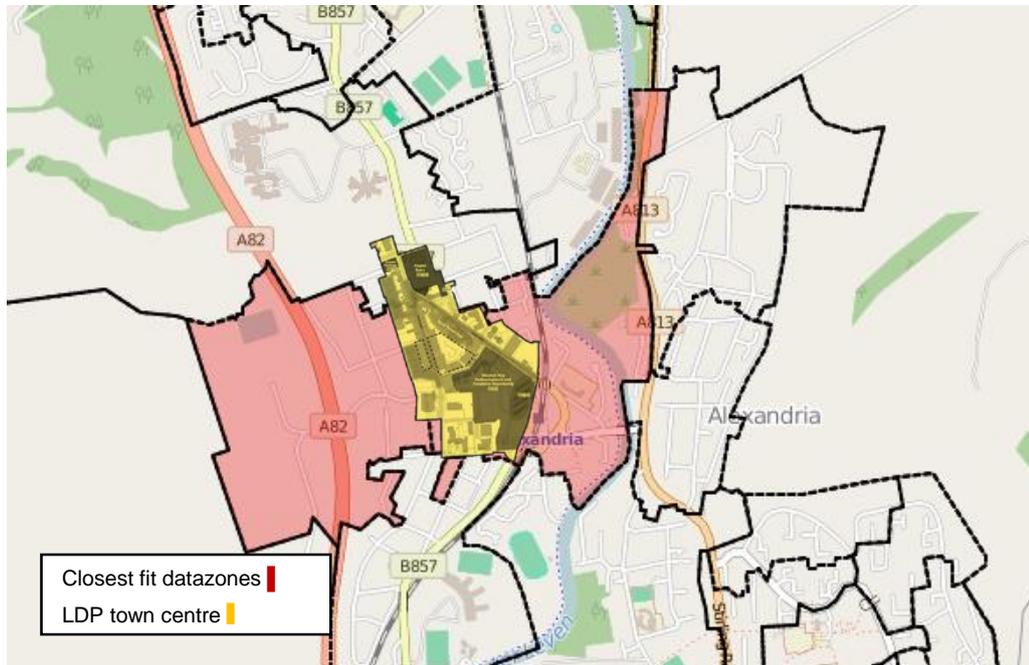
Final report: 16/05/2016

For: West Dunbartonshire Council

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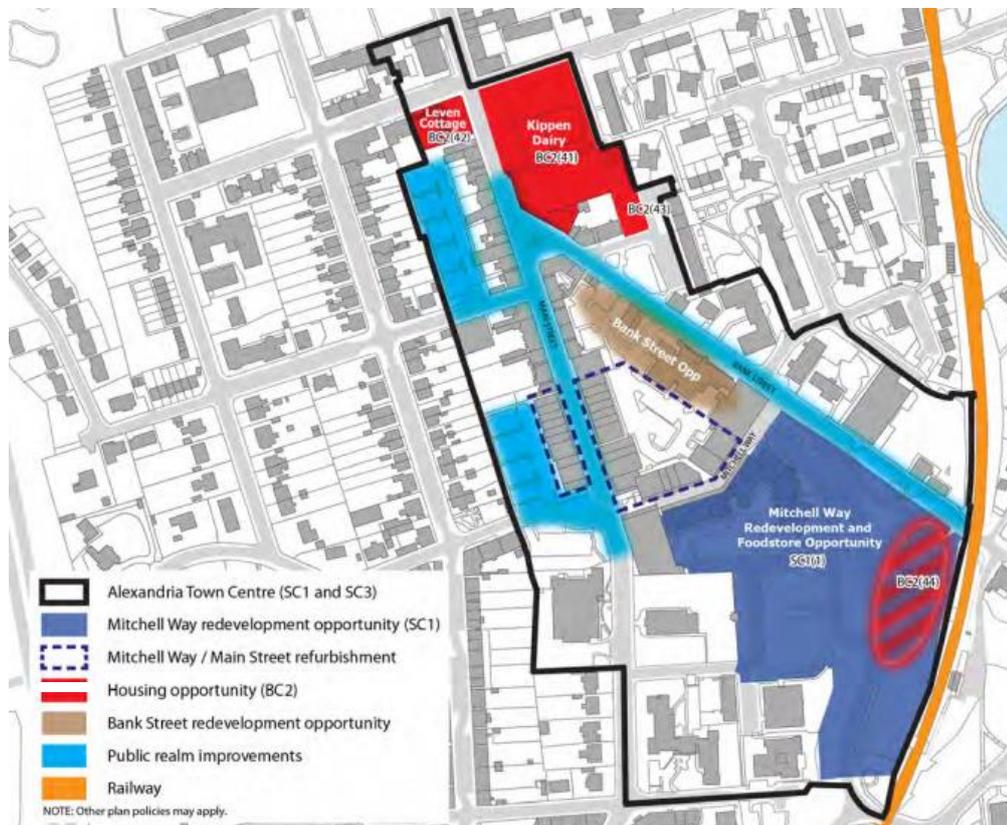
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**Figure: Alexandria Town Centre and Town Centre Datazones**



Datazones S01006277 and S01006278

**Figure: Alexandria Town Centre**



Source: West Dunbartonshire Council Local Development Plan 2013

## 1. Understanding Scottish Places Summary

This report presents a summary of the Your Town Audit (YTA) for Alexandria, conducted by Scotland's Towns Partnership and EKOS. The detailed YTA Framework and Data Workbook are provided under separate cover.

The YTA was developed to provide a framework to measure and monitor the performance of Scotland's towns and town centres using a series of Key Performance Indicators. It provides a comprehensive audit of Alexandria with data on up to 180 KPIs across seven themes – Locality, Accessibility, Local Services, Activities + Events, Development Capacity, Tourism, and Place + Quality Impressions.

The [Understanding Scottish Places](#) (USP) data platform provides a summary analysis for Alexandria and identifies four comparator towns that have similar characteristics: Johnstone, Larkhall, Port Glasgow and Grangemouth. The USP platform – [www.usp.scot](http://www.usp.scot) – describes Alexandria in the following **general terms**:

**Alexandria's Interrelationships:** Alexandria is an *'interdependent town'* which means it has a medium number of assets in relation to its population; average diversity of jobs; and residents travel a mix of short and long distances to travel to work and study. These towns are attractors of people from neighbouring towns who come to access some assets and jobs but they are also reliant on neighbouring towns for other assets and jobs.

**Alexandria's Typology:** Social and council housing are the norm in these towns. Manufacturing and construction are the dominant forms of employment. Health and social work services are particularly active. There is a relatively high level of unemployment. Educational attainment is low. Car ownership is low, meaning that many residents in these towns are reliant on public transport.

When Alexandria is compared to towns identified by the USP platform as being similar, a key variations include its number of children. It also differs in terms of the diversity of jobs, particularly relating to the number of public sector jobs.

Building on the USP, this report presents the results of our detailed analysis of Alexandria using the Scottish Government's [Town Centre Toolkit](#) – an online resource available via the USP website which provides advice, guidance and case studies across three thematic areas: accessible, active and attractive.

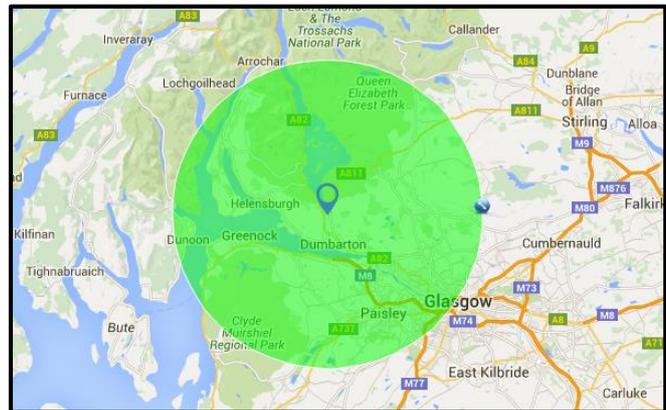
## 2. Accessible Town Centre

Alexandria is the largest town in the Vale of Leven, the valley straddling the River Leven that runs from Loch Lomond and meets the River Clyde at Dumbarton. The town adjoins the surrounding communities of Balloch, on the banks of Loch Lomond, and Renton to the south. Alexandria's town centre area takes in its railway station and core retail offering, centred on a traditional main street and a pedestrianised shopping area – see the LDP town centre plan on page 1.

Alexandria has good connectivity with the rest of its urban conurbation and west central Scotland, with Glasgow around 45 minutes away by rail and road. A train station is located centrally in

Alexandria, and there are stations in the nearby settlements of Renton and Balloch. Rail services run on a half-hourly basis throughout the day, providing rapid access to Dumbarton, Glasgow and into Lanarkshire.

### 15 Mile radius around Alexandria



Buses run to the centre of Alexandria, with services to and from Helensburgh, Dumbarton and villages on the eastern side of Loch Lomond. The A82 skirts the western edge of Alexandria, with this being the main route from Glasgow to the west Highlands, Kintyre and Helensburgh. There is a suitable number of free parking spaces in and around the town centre, with 56 at the station's Park and Ride facility, and more surrounding the main retail area at Mitchell Way. There is also on-street parking through much of the town – the double yellow lines on Main Street do not appear to be adhered to.

National Cycle Route NCN 7, which runs between Glasgow and Loch Lomond, passes alongside the River Leven and the edge of Alexandria. However, the area it passes by is largely residential and there is no indication of the town centre and therefore little to tempt passing trade further in to the town.

Alexandria has good 3G and 4G mobile reception, and superfast broadband has been rolled out to the town. There is good access to local services in the town centre, with a medical surgery, dentist and council 'one stop shop' office. The regional hospital, leisure centre, job centre and parks are located on the edge of the town centre.

### 3. Active Town Centre

#### 3.1 Population and Housing

Alexandria has a population of around 10,500, with around 240 living within the town centre area<sup>1</sup>. However, there is large number of houses close to the town centre, with the two datazones that cover it (taking in a wider area, see map on page 1) having a population of 1,700 people<sup>2</sup>. The population of the two central datazones increased by 9% from 2003 to 2013, compared to a -1.5% decline in the town as a whole. This is likely a result of house building activity on the periphery of the town centre, including on the eastern bank of the Leven. Overall, the population decline in Alexandria has been less pronounced than in West Dunbartonshire (-3%) over this period, although contrasts with a 5% increase in Scotland.

More than two thirds of housing in the central datazones is in flatted accommodation (68%), typically one or two bedroom and Council Tax band A/B/C. This is a mix of newer developments and older social housing stock, although there are also detached and semi-detached dwellings spread around the edge of the town centre. Tenure is split between owner-occupied (56%), social rented (34%) and private rented (10%), with a small number of vacant dwellings (2%). Compared to other towns which have been audited, Alexandria has a low incidence of private rented homes.

The average purchase price of a dwelling in the central datazones is very close to that of the wider town (£113k compared with £117k) and increased by 71% between 2003 and 2013<sup>3</sup>. House prices are considerably higher than Dumbarton and Clydebank town centres, although this is likely due to the higher proportion of detached/semi-detached homes within the relevant datazones, the lowest level at which this data is available.

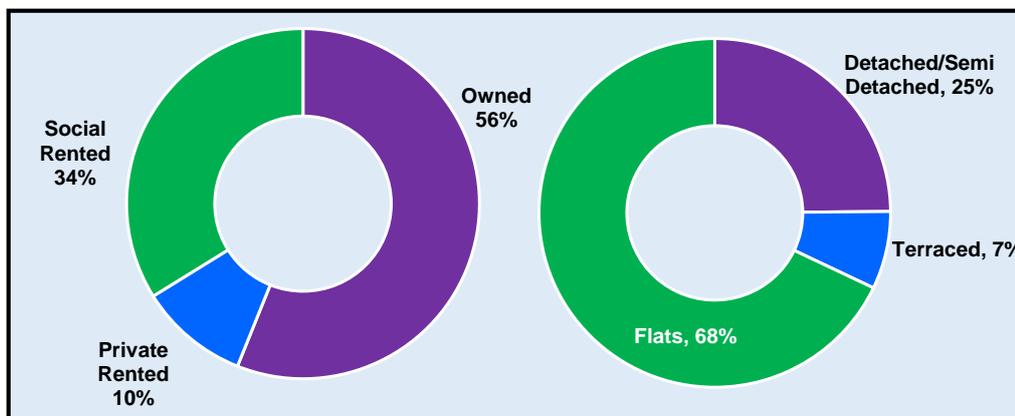
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<sup>1</sup> Output Areas S00096330, S00096331 & S00096337 (Census 2011)

<sup>2</sup> Datazones S01006277 and S01006278 (Scottish Government Statistics)

<sup>3</sup> Source: Scottish Government Statistics

### Alexandria Town Centre Housing Mix



## 3.2 Employment

Around 42% of Alexandria's 1,900 jobs are located in the central datazones. National statistics cannot be taken down to the town centre level, but record 470 businesses within the larger Vale of Leven area, with the YTA street audit finding 67 within Alexandria town centre (i.e. businesses immediately visible from the street). There are on average 12 employees in Alexandria per town centre business – lower than other towns in which audits have been undertaken, including Kirkcaldy (17), Alloa (18.5), Clydebank (22) and Hamilton (27). This is likely due to the low number of multiples/larger retailers in Alexandria.

## 3.3 Retail



We identified 43 retailers in the town centre, predominantly located in the core retail area of Main Street – a traditional high street with a range of uses on it – and Mitchell Way, a 1970s pedestrianised shopping precinct with residential flats on upper floors. However, the flats have now all been vacated, with many boarded up, while at pedestrian level there is a high concentration of vacant retail units. It should be noted that West Dunbartonshire Council (WDC) has actively sought to vacate these units to allow long standing plans for demolition and redevelopment to proceed.

There are also retail vacancies spread along Main Street, although some of these units are being left empty to provide potential options for the remaining commercial occupiers on Mitchell Way.

Alexandria town centre has been consistently identified by WDC as a key site for regeneration, including in the Council's Infrastructure Investment Plan (2012), Local Development Plan (2013) and Economic Development Strategy (2015).

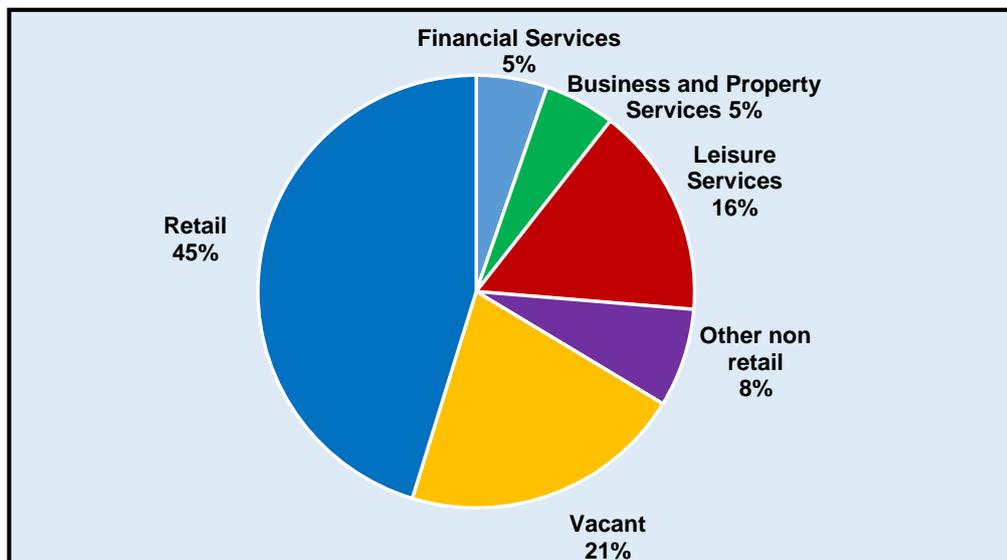
The LDP highlights the importance of improving the retail offering in Alexandria town centre. The plan supports the development of a new supermarket, covering much of the southern half of the Mitchell Way site and its adjacent car park. In March 2016, a preferred developer was selected to take forward proposals which include a 25,000 sq ft foodstore, 10 retail units, 24 residential units and public realm improvements. This marks a significant step forward for the regeneration of the town centre, with demolition of the existing site set to begin in late spring 2016.

At the other end of the Main Street, just outside of the town centre, there is another underused site that has also been identified as suitable for a supermarket, and for which planning permission was granted in June 2015. This development is in the grounds of the Lomond Galleries building, built as the Argyll Motor Works in the early twentieth century and re-opened as a shopping centre in the late 1990s, but with a high number of vacancies. As this site is outside of the main town centre area, the distance means it will likely have less spin-off benefit for other retailers in the town centre than a development on the Mitchell Way site.

At 21% of all units, overall vacancy in the town centre is very high although many of these units are being left empty to allow redevelopment to take place. By comparison, the vacancy rate in other completed YTA audited towns ranged from 3% to 17%, including Alloa (10%), Kilmarnock (15%), Ayr (16%) and Kirkcaldy (17%). Clydebank – where the town centre primarily covers the shopping centre – has among the lowest rates of retail vacancy of any of the YTA towns at 5%.

Shops in Alexandria operate standard opening hours of around 9am to 5.30pm, with the six small supermarkets and convenience stores opening for longer hours (variously to 8pm, 9pm and 10pm).

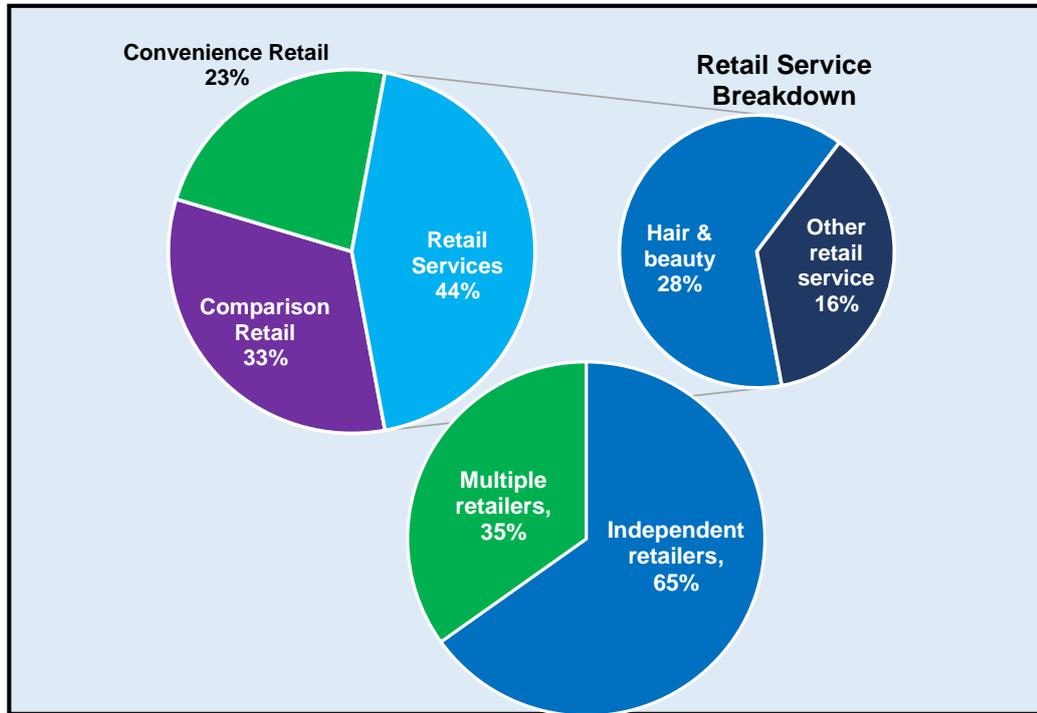
### Town Centre Unit Mix



The town centre is dominated by retail, amounting to 45% of all units. The YTA analysis is based on the following retail definitions:

- **Convenience Retail:** primarily low cost goods that are typically bought out of habit or on impulse i.e. food, drink (alcohol and non-alcohol), news, tobacco, etc – *10 convenience retailers identified in Alexandria town centre;*
- **Comparison Retail:** all other retail purchases comprising goods bought at infrequent intervals where consumers will compare and contrast products and prices – *14 comparison retailers identified in Alexandria town centre;* and
- **Retail Services:** services that consumers would expect to find in a town centre including hairdresser, beauty salon, repair of goods, hire of specialist clothing, health clinics, post office, travel agent, etc – *19 retail service operators identified in Alexandria town centre.*

**Retail Mix**



Alexandria has a low number of comparison retailers and national chains, with M&Co being the main clothes shop presence and a number of chemists/toiletries shops.

This is likely indicative of its size and proximity to larger retail destinations, particularly Clydebank and Dumbarton which function as the main district retail centres. There are a number of independent stores that add particular value to the town's retail mix, including a fishmonger and good quality butcher. With a loyal customer base, this type of store will draw in footfall (and therefore spend) to the town centre.



## 4. Attractive Town Centre

### 4.1 Overview

A masterplan for Alexandria was produced by West Dunbartonshire Council in 2008 in consultation with local residents and businesses, and further reviewed in 2012. This identified six key development sites around the town centre, four concerned with housing. A portion of the area around the Main Street has since been redeveloped as housing while work is underway on another affordable/social housing site by Bank Street.

Some work was undertaken in 2014 to improve the pedestrian realm at each end of Mitchell Way. Nonetheless, the appearance of the southern section of the town centre is poor in its existing state, although demolition is set to begin in 2016.

On Main Street, the quality of the public realm is patchy with improvements to the area where it meets with Mitchell Way – where there is good quality seating, paving and lighting (pictured) – not reflected elsewhere across the town.

The footpath layout from the station to the town centre is also confusing for those unfamiliar with the town, with routes that were connected by a now removed footbridge still intact but not leading anywhere. The extensive use of pedestrian guard rails – in part due to the car parks and roads that cut through the town – also inhibit pedestrian movement. However, the LDP acknowledges that some changes to the town's road layout may be necessary with the proposed developments.

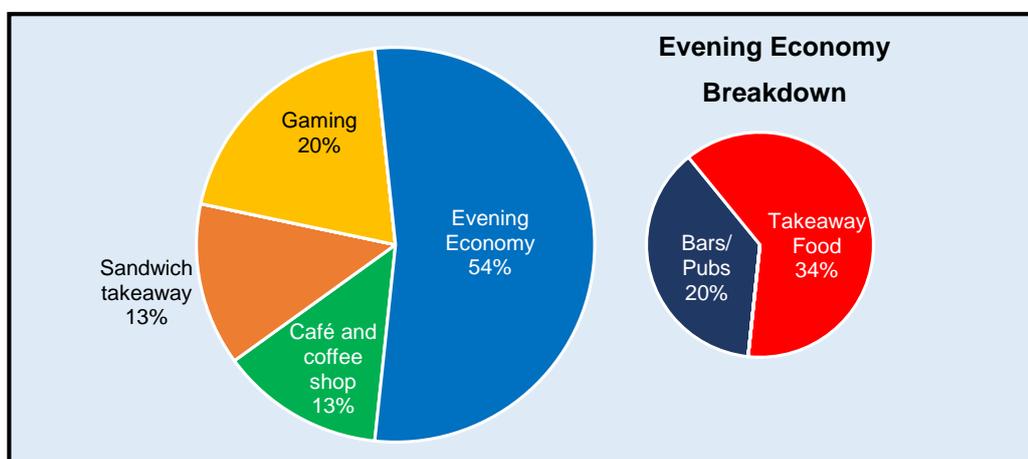
A recent resident's survey (2015) saw 84% of resident's reporting that they view the town as unattractive and more than half as unsafe. A community-led action plan is being developed to overcome this – a key factor will be continuing efforts to improve the public realm around the town centre, boosting footfall and ensuring there remains



positive reasons for people to visit the town centre. The current regeneration activity is likely to go some way to rectifying this, with key projects including:

- the Mitchell Way development;
- the demolition of some redundant buildings on Bank Street, with a view to redeveloping these sites; and
- the development of 55 housing units by Caledonia Housing on Main Street, immediately north of the Smollett Fountain, which will significantly enhance this area of the town.

#### 4.2 Leisure Mix



The leisure offering in the town centre is fairly limited with two cafés, five takeaways, three betting shops and three pubs (two of these are technically just outside of the town centre boundary). There are no restaurants within the town centre.



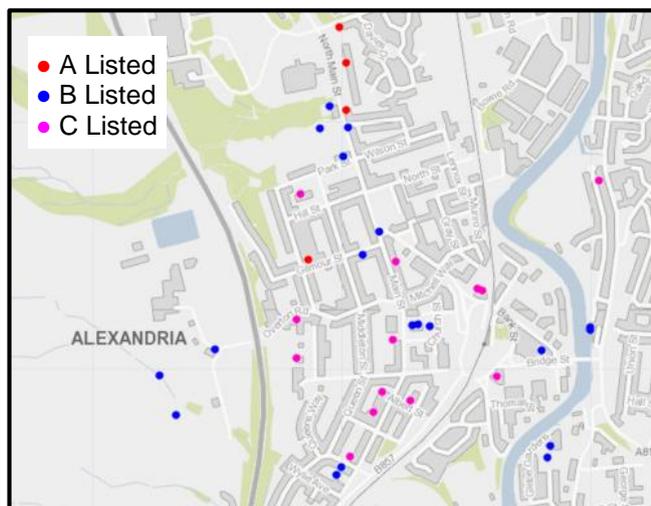
The Vale of Leven Pool is located near the edge of the town centre. Refurbished in 2014, it includes a gym, health suite and dance studio.

There is no visitor accommodation within the town, with the nearest hotels being a short distance away in Balloch.

### 4.3 Attractions and Heritage

Alexandria boasts good built heritage assets in its traditional sandstone high street – illustrated by the nineteenth century Smollett Fountain that sits at the town cross of Bank Street and Main Street. However, more could be made to emphasise the fountain, for instance by decluttering the pavement around it.

#### Listed Buildings in Alexandria



Further along is the impressive, Category A listed Lomond Galleries building, transformed from its original industrial use. There are two large parks nearby and both within walking distance of the town centre. These are Argyll Park, dedicated to sports, including pitches and a bowling green, and Christie Park, which is more ornamental, with circular lawns and flower arrangements.

Despite having key tourist routes on both sides – the A82 to the west and National Cycle Route NCN 7 to the east – there is currently little to attract visitors into Alexandria itself. In this respect, the town is failing to exploit its proximity to Balloch, which acts as a gateway to the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park and is a popular visitor destination. However, a charrette – an intensive planning exercise involving the local community – was undertaken in Balloch in early 2016, and among the issues up for consideration was how the town can become better connected to the wider Vale of Leven and generate economic benefits across the area. The recommendations of the charrette are therefore likely to have positive implications for Alexandria.

The Lomond Galleries building was initially intended to capitalise on visitors to the nearby national park. While an attractive building and with an impressive heritage, it has struggled to retain footfall and retail lets. The presence of a major supermarket chain on this site or at Mitchell Way may prove able to draw in more passing trade and likely spin-off benefits for other retailers.

Another attraction in the town is the Loch Lomond Brewery, located in the Lomond Industrial Estate and which includes a shop and offers tours on request.

#### 4.4 Attractiveness Review

The YTA includes an independent review on place and quality impressions, with Alexandria scoring below average when compared to other towns. This is in a large part due to the high number of vacant units, which are concentrated around the dated Mitchell Way complex.

Business confidence in the town centre was gauged from a small sample of interviews undertaken with independent traders. Scores averaged at 3.9 / 10, which is the lowest score across ten completed YTA town audits – by comparison, Clydebank scored 5.9 and Alloa, 5.2.

Individual shop fronts and window displays were graded out of ten during the on-street audit, with a town centre average score of 6.2 for the condition of shop fronts and 6.4 for quality of window display. This is slightly below average but not surprising when low scoring vacant units are factored in.



## 5. YTA Summary and Key Points

The following are offered as final comments on the Your Town Audit of Alexandria, within the framework of the Scottish Government's Town Centre Toolkit.

### 5.1 Accessible Town Centre

- there is good access by road, rail and bus to Alexandria, with frequent and fast services to surrounding settlements;
- the town is located on a popular cycle path between Loch Lomond and Glasgow;
- improved signage around the town centre could help attract passing spend from the A82 and NCN 7 cycle route; and
- linkages between the east and west/upper end of the town centre could be improved – at present, the railway station feels dislocated from the town centre area when travelling on foot, although redevelopment of the area to the south of Mitchell Way will act towards rectifying this.

### 5.2 Active Town Centre

- there is a long identified need to find an anchor that will draw in and secure footfall in the town centre, with a food store presenting the most obvious solution. The prevailing retail climate has made this a challenge to realise, although progress is now underway. The location of the supermarket (and positioning of its parking and front door), its size, and what it will sell are important considerations for the long-term health of Alexandria town centre;
- there would be value in exploring how special events and activities can be organised and held in the town centre as these could bring spin-off economic benefits – the Christmas lights switch-on (funded by WDC) was the only activity or event that we identified for Alexandria;
- there may be further ways in which businesses and residents within Alexandria can come together to organise activity and promote the town centre and their collective interests;

- there is already a fairly high level of housing surrounding the town centre and this looks set to increase with the new development by Caledonia Housing – this is positive in providing ready footfall for town centre businesses but also for ensuring that it remains busy and safe at all times of day i.e. passive policing; and
- finding a sustainable future use for the Lomond Galleries that protects and harnesses its status as a key asset in the town is important – whether commercial or residential.

### 5.3 Attractive Town Centre

- the town centre has good built assets in its busy Main Street and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Smollett Fountain;
- the need to improve the public realm and overall appearance of the buildings around Mitchell Way is evidently a priority for the town, and work is underway to progress this;
- the high rate of vacant shop units in Alexandria presents a challenge for the town centre – other towns (e.g. Start-Up Street Stirling) have made use of vacant commercial space to encourage new activity by local entrepreneurs, community groups or artists on a pop-up basis;
- the vacant flats above Mitchell Way are unsightly and in poor condition – a first phase of demolition works at Mitchell Way will start in late spring 2016 whilst the preferred developer for the site moves forward with plans to redevelop the site and engage with the local community;
- a high number of visitors pass Alexandria each year – by coach, car, rail and bicycle, but never come into the town – exploring how the town can exploit its location may be important for its future but it should be recognised that its primary function will remain as a service centre for local people.