Your Town Audit: Dumbarton

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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Figure: Dumbarton Town Centre Datazone

Datazone S01006241

Figure: Dumbarton 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 Dumbarton, 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 Dumbarton 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 Dumbarton and identifies twelve comparator towns that have similar characteristics, with the most similar being Rutherglen, Larkhall, Port Glasgow and Johnstone. The USP platform – www.usp.scot – describes Dumbarton in the following general terms:

**Dumbarton’s Interrelationships**: Dumbarton 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.

**Dumbarton’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.

Comparing Dumbarton to towns with similar USP typology and interrelationships shows it has a similar number of children in primary schools, children in secondary schools, jobs, and shops. It differs in terms of the number of hospitals, the diversity of jobs, and the distance travelled to work. Dumbarton differs most from its group in its high number of public sector jobs.
Building on the USP, this report presents the results of our detailed analysis of Dumbarton based around 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

Dumbarton is the second largest town by population in West Dunbartonshire. The town sits on the north bank of the River Clyde, with the River Leven cutting through the town itself. The town centre in Dumbarton is concentrated on a traditional high street and the pedestrianised, partially covered Artizan Centre. It also takes in some other facilities, such as the sheriff court, car parking and part of the town’s waterfront area.

Dumbarton is well connected to the west of Scotland and towns in the surrounding area, by both road and rail. There are three railway stations in the town – Dumbarton Central, just north of the town centre, Dumbarton East, and Dalreoch, on the town’s west. Rail services are frequent with destinations including Glasgow, Balloch, Helensburgh, Oban and Fort William. The Caledonian Sleeper also calls in Dumbarton six nights a week, providing a direct service to London.

Dumbarton has bus connections to Glasgow, Clydebank, Helensburgh and Alexandria. The A82, which connects Glasgow to Loch Lomond and the West Highlands, lies to the north east of the town.

There is a high number of free car parking spaces in the town, with 450 in the town centre area and a further 1,300 at the St James Retail Park to its immediate east.

National Cycle Route NCN 7, which runs between Glasgow and Loch Lomond, passes through Dumbarton. The route brings visitors on to the high street, which with its retail and food and drink provision will encourage visitor spend in Dumbarton.

Dumbarton has good mobile connectivity and superfast broadband capability. The town centre provides access to local services which, alongside a mix of retailers and
business services, includes the sheriff court, job centre, health centre, library, community theatre and a community hall. The leisure centre is located just outside of the town centre, as well as two key tourist attractions, the Scottish Maritime Museum and Dumbarton Castle. West Dunbartonshire Council’s office will move from current premises on the edge of Dumbarton to the town centre in spring 2017. This will restore a Category A listed vacant and derelict building, boost footfall in the town centre through relocation of the workforce and demonstrates strong commitment to the Town Centre First principle.

Most key services within the town centre are within walking distance of each other. Despite this, the different areas of the town centre can feel dislocated, particularly given the prominence of surface level car parks and the dual carriageway. Improving walkability and pedestrian linkages has therefore been identified as a priority in the town, including proposals to open up the waterfront. Among the ideas which emerged from the Dumbarton Rock and Castle Charrette held in early 2015 was a proposal for a footbridge connecting the town centre with Levengrove Park, and a new waterfront path.
3. Active Town Centre

3.1 Population and Housing

Dumbarton has a population of just under 17,200, with around 380 people living in the town centre at the time of the last census\(^1\). Dumbarton’s population declined -0.7% in the decade to 2013, a less pronounced decrease than West Dunbartonshire as a whole (-3%). However, this contrasts with a 5% increase in Scotland over this period.

A very high proportion of housing in the town centre\(^2\) is in flatted accommodation (92%), typically one or two bedroom and Council Tax band A/B/C. Housing is a mix of traditional tenements located around Station Road and mid-rise blocks of current/former social housing stock near Glasgow Road. Tenure is split between owner-occupied (51%), private rented (26%) and social rented (23%), although the town centre has a relatively high number of vacant dwellings (4%). Dumbarton town centre has a much higher rate of private rented dwellings (26%) than the wider town (8%).

The average purchase price of a town centre dwelling (£69,000) is lower than that of the town as a whole (£134,000) – both increased by 76% between 2003 and 2013.

Dumbarton Town Centre Housing Mix

Source: statistics.gov.scot and Census 2011

3.2 Employment

Just over one-third (37%) of the town’s 6,300 jobs are located in the town centre datazone. National statistics record 480 businesses in Dumbarton, with 355 in the

\(^1\) Census 2011 Output Areas S00096437, S00096438, S00096439, S00096440, S00096441 & S00096442

\(^2\) Datazone S01006241, which includes the LDP defined town centre area and St James Retail Park
town centre and surrounding area. The YTA street audit located 119 within Dumbarton town centre (i.e. businesses immediately visible from the street). There are on average 13 employees in Dumbarton 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), although slightly higher than Alexandria (12).

### 3.3 Retail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>306 residents per town centre retail outlet</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>56 town centre retail units in use</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>21 vacant town centre units</strong></td>
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</table>

We identified 56 retailers in the town centre, mostly located on either sides of High Street, which links each end of the town centre. Mid-way along the street is the Artizan Shopping Centre, a pedestrianised and partially covered shopping street with a high number of vacancies. This is also the case in some other parts of High Street – although generally the quality of public realm is good and has undergone visible improvement over recent years. There is a good amount of seating, the streets are clean and, although out of season, evidence of floral displays.

In some sense shopping patterns within the town have shifted away from the traditional main street and towards the St James Retail Park and supermarkets, which while just five minutes’ walk from High Street, feel removed from it. The retail park is set back from the main road with a large number of car parking spaces in front. In February 2016 planning permission was renewed for three new non-food units at the retail park, totalling 70,000sq ft, which will further consolidate its position as a main retail destination in the town. Dumbarton’s other major supermarket, Morrisons, is found on the other side of Glasgow Road from the retail park, also just outside of the defined town centre.

The most recent West Dunbartonshire Local Development Plan (2013) supports maintaining an attractive retail core within the town centre, including a refurbished Artizan Centre. However, it also identifies a range of uses for the town centre as a priority, including residential development, which would increase the catchment population, with footfall and spend opportunities for town centre businesses.
Overall unit vacancies in the town centre are fairly high, at 15%. There is a risk that development on the edge of the town centre reduces trade on the High Street. However, the vacancy rate is comparable to other towns in which audits have been undertaken, including Alloa (10%), Kilmarnock (15%), Ayr (16%) and Kirkcaldy (17%). Two other West Dunbartonshire towns were audited in late 2015/early 2016. Clydebank, where the town centre is dominated by an indoor shopping centre, has a low vacancy rate at 5%, while Alexandria’s is considerably higher at 21%.

Shops in Dumbarton town centre operate standard opening hours of around 9am to 5.30pm. Those in the St James Retail Park generally open until 8pm, while the Morrisons is open until 10pm and ASDA operates 24/7.

**Town Centre Unit Mix**

![Pie chart showing town centre unit mix]

In common with other audited town centres, retail forms the largest single unit use, with 40% of all units, although this is a lower proportion than found elsewhere, including Kilmarnock (50%), Kirkcaldy (54%) and Ayr (55%).

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 – 5 convenience retailers identified in Dumbarton town centre;
• **Comparison Retail**: all other retail purchases comprising goods bought at infrequent intervals where consumers will compare and contrast products and prices – *30 comparison retailers identified in Dumbarton 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 Dumbarton town centre*.

### Retail Mix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparison Retail</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Services</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience Retail</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair &amp; beauty</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other retail</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other retail service</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In comparison with other audited towns, Dumbarton has a high proportion of multiple retailers (48%), comparable only with Clydebank (51%). Independent traders make up a far greater proportion of the retail base in other audited towns, including Kirkcaldy (61%), Hamilton (62%), Ayr (64%) and Kilmarnock (65%).
4. Attractive Town Centre

4.1 Overview

A number of studies and strategies for Dumbarton town centre have been produced over the last 15 years, most recently the Dumbarton Town Centre and Waterfront Revised Urban Strategy in November 2014, and Dumbarton Rock and Castle Charrette in early 2015.

This Town Centre and Waterfront Revised Urban Strategy has an intended lifespan of between five and ten years and takes in a number of different key issues, themes and projects that will enhance the attractiveness of the town. While not seeking to repeat the extensive work undertaken in this study, a number of issues and recent developments in the town centre are highlighted below.

Work is currently underway on West Dunbartonshire Council’s new office in the town centre. Once completed in early 2017, 500 staff will transfer from the current office at Garshake Road, on the periphery of the town, to new accommodation on the site of the former Old Academy building. As well as preserving a prominent listed building, boosting wider regeneration efforts in the town centre and its attractiveness, it will be a major boost to town centre footfall, bringing benefits to nearby shops and retail service businesses.
In some areas of high vacancy, steps have been taken to alleviate the appearance of this through use of window vinyl, particularly around the Artizan Centre/College Way (pictured above). While this removes the visual blight of empty and boarded up shops, it still struggles to give the impression of a vibrant town centre, particularly when there is no traffic on the street. One positive step that has been taken, though, is the conversion of a unit within the Artizan Centre into a community hub, which hosts art classes and community events.

Regenerating Dumbarton’s waterfront, including the disused former distillery site, has been identified as a priority in the town. In early 2015, a charrette was held for Dumbarton Rock and Castle, taking in much of the waterfront area, which allowed community input into these proposals.

Dumbarton has an attractive waterfront, lined with boats from the nearby marina, and sided by the nineteenth century Levengrove Park, the dominant presence of Dumbarton Rock and Castle on its west bank and the town centre on its eastern side. Although the eastern bank has a pedestrian footpath, trees and seating, it has been recognised that more could be made of the river on this side. As the High Street backs on to the river, back lots facing the river are largely used for loading, storage of bins and so on, with unappealing rendering and high walls on some units.

Some encouraging steps have been made to increase the links between High Street and the waterfront, with improved realm on connecting lanes. Another positive step has been the opening of a Wetherspoons pub in the former Woolworths on High Street, which has veranda doors facing on to the waterfront and an outdoor seating area. This is a good example of what can be achieved through embracing Dumbarton’s waterfront.

There is a challenge – as recognised by WDC and other town centre partners – in relation to the volume of parking spaces which take up much of the area between Riverside Lane and the river. While no doubt important in encouraging footfall in the town, they do detract from the use of the waterfront for other purposes e.g. special events and recreation. Consideration could be given to more sensitive use of lampposts, signposts, recycling bins etc along the waterfront, as the area appears cluttered and this lessens its overall appeal.
However, the waterfront is set to be transformed in the short to medium term through various projects being taken forward from the charrette. The regeneration of the former distillery site will open up the town centre to the castle/rock, and development proposals are being advanced by Cullross, the new owners of the former Vico site, Turnberry Homes and Dumbarton FC. Designs for a new waterfront path to connect the town centre with the castle and rock are also being developed.

### 4.2 Leisure Mix

The leisure offering in the town centre is dominated by evening economy uses, which is largely composed of pubs and takeaways, five restaurants/pub restaurants (with another restaurant planned) and one night club. These are located along (and just off) the length of High Street, providing reasons to visit the area in both the day time and evening. Maintaining this mix is important to ensuring that Dumbarton High Street remains vibrant at all times of day.
The council operated Meadow Centre, which includes a swimming pool and gym, is located outside of the town centre, a short walk from Dumbarton Central railway station. There is also a boating marina in the town, Sandpoint Marina. Dumbarton Rock and Castle Charrette identified the potential for enhanced facilities at the marina, which could boost the wider regeneration of the waterfront.

Dumbarton Football Club play in the Scottish Championship, with their 2000-capacity ground situated directly below Dumbarton Rock. Their home games attract crowds of around 1,000. Various amateur sports clubs are also based in the town.

The town is well served by visitor accommodation, with five hotels. However, these are all located close to the A82 and have on-site bars and restaurants, so will not necessarily bring visitors into the town centre. There are two chain hotels and three independents (two of which are rated three stars by Visit Scotland, while one is awaiting grading), totalling 160 rooms.
4.3 Attractions and Heritage

Dumbarton’s rich heritage is an important asset to the town. Its skyline is dominated by the imposing Dumbarton Rock, topped by Dumbarton Castle. The River Leven weaves its way through the town and like the Rock, helps give the town a strong sense of place and individuality. The Council are actively considering ways in which the Rock and Castle can be made more attractive to both residents and visitors, with proposals including a new multifunctional visitor centre, parking facilities, lighting of the Castle, and an enhanced climbing area.

Listed Buildings in Dumbarton

Dumbarton has undergone huge changes over recent decades and, like Clydebank, now has a large expanse of disused, former industrial land on its waterfront. The Council are working with the owners of the waterfront sites, including Cullross Limited and Turnberry Homes, to secure their redevelopment. A priority for the
Council, which emerged from the 2015 charrette, is the creation of a new waterfront path linking the town centre with the Rock and Castle.

A heritage trail was re-launched in Dumbarton in 2014, which takes in all of the key heritage assets around the town centre. A leaflet has been produced to provide context and there are plaques located around the town (pictured on previous page). As well as the Historic Environment Scotland operated Dumbarton Castle, which attracted 17,000 visitors in 2013/14, the Scottish Maritime Museum and Denny Tank is located just outside of the town centre, at its eastern edge. This is a four star visitor attraction and opens six days a week.

4.4 Attractiveness Review

The YTA includes an independent review of place and quality impressions, with scores in Dumbarton fairly comparable to other towns which have been reviewed.

Business confidence in the town centre was gauged from a small sample of interviews undertaken with independent traders. Scores in Dumbarton averaged at 5.3/10, which is slightly below the average across other YTA audited towns (5.6/10) – by comparison, Alexandria scored 3.9, Alloa, 5.2, Clydebank 5.9, Kilmarnock 6.4 and Ayr 6.8.

Individual unit fronts and shop window displays were graded out of ten during the on-street audit, with a town centre average score of 6.8 for the condition of unit fronts and 7.5 for quality of window display. The former is in line with the average across other audited towns, but Dumbarton scores slightly better in relation to quality of shop window displays than the 6.9/10 average.
5. **YTA Summary and Key Points**

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

5.1 **Accessible Town Centre**

- Dumbarton has good public transport links to surrounding settlements, with frequent and fast access by road, rail and bus to Clydebank and Glasgow, and good road access via the Erskine Bridge to Paisley and Glasgow Airport;

- the town is located on a popular cycle path (NCN 7) between Loch Lomond and Glasgow, which brings visitors through the town, with cycle racks provided at the Artizan Centre and along High Street; and

- as identified in the recent charrette, pedestrian linkages could be improved in the town, with its various parts feeling disconnected for pedestrians/cyclists, particularly when coupled with a large number of surface level car parks throughout the town centre and dual carriageway that separates the town centre from the station. However, there is good directional signposting and walkways in some parts.

5.2 **Active Town Centre**

- Dumbarton already hosts a number of events, some high profile, although these tend to be in Levengrove Park. There may be potential to bring special events, markets etc. into the town centre, especially in the partially covered Artizan Centre;

- the redevelopment of the waterfront sites has potential to boost the number of homes within and adjacent to the town centre, with benefits for businesses and the overall vibrancy of the town. Combined with the new council office building, this has the potential to transform the east of the town centre and provide a high quality, pedestrian friendly link between the High Street core and the retail park; and

- previous studies have highlighted the lack of formal organisation among businesses in Dumbarton town centre – even a small step such as a shared promotional page on social media (the ‘I Love Clarkston’ – run by a local BID
– being a good example) could be useful to promote town centre activity among residents and shoppers.

5.3 Attractive Town Centre

- the town has a number of impressive assets, such as the waterfront, Rock and Castle, Scottish Maritime Museum and the architectural quality of many of the buildings along High Street;

- the proposals which emerged from the Dumbarton Rock and Castle Charrette will contribute to the regeneration of the town’s waterfront. The car parking and back-facing High Street units are challenges, although some positive steps have already been taken to improve the public realm, which are set to continue;

- the lack of a conventional grid layout and scale of car parks in the area between High Street and Dumbarton Central station are a challenge to development – as noted in the 2014 town centre strategy, a large amount of “dead ground” exists. However, a number of proposals are now being investigated to reinvigorate areas of the town; and

- empty units along High Street and within the Artizan Centre continue to be a problem in the town – any temporary/pop-up uses that are attracted to these units should be explored and encourage, while acknowledging that some attempt has already been made to do this with the Artizan Community Hub.