Your Town Audit: Larkhall

June 2018
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Direct enquiries regarding this report should be submitted to:

Mhairy Donaghy, EKOS, 0141 353 8309  mhairy.donaghy@ekos.co.uk

Rosie Jenkins, EKOS, 0141 353 8322  rosie.jenkins@ekos.co.uk
1. Understanding Scottish Places Summary

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

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 Larkhall 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 Larkhall and describes Larkhall in the following general terms:

**Larkhall’s Inter-relationships:** Larkhall is an interdependent town. Interdependent towns have a medium number of assets in relation to their population; average diversity of jobs; and residents travel a mix of short and long distances 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.

**Larkhall’s Typology:** Social and council housing are the norm in these large 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.

Combining inter-relationships and typology, the USP data platform – [www.usp.scot](http://www.usp.scot) – provides a summary analysis for Larkhall and identifies 11 comparator towns that have similar characteristics, with the most similar being Alexandria, Port Glasgow, Dumbarton and Grangemouth\(^\text{1}\).

These towns have similarities in terms of the number of GPs and dentists, children in secondary schools and the diversity of retail offering.

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\(^1\) The other comparator towns are identified as Irvine, Blantyre, Rutherglen, Wishaw, Airdrie, Bellshill and Ardrossan.
Larkhall differs in terms of the number of public sector jobs, diversity of jobs, number of shops, distance travelled to work, number of children in primary schools and the number of charities.

Building on the USP, this report presents the results of our detailed analysis of Larkhall 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.

Our analysis of Larkhall is based on analysis of data collated from a range of sources including official government statistics (Census, SIMD, BRES, etc.), the USP data and bespoke data collected during an audit of Larkhall town centre.

In total 38 YTA audits have been prepared for towns across Scotland providing consistent data across a range of KPIs. Where appropriate, this report provides comparisons for Larkhall against the YTA town average. In particular, YTAs have been prepared for five of the USP Comparator towns defined earlier – Alexandria, Ardrossan, Blantyre, Dumbarton, and Irvine – and specific reference is made to these towns where relevant.

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2 It has not been possible to collect full KPI data for all towns – the number of YTA comparator towns therefore differs across this report.
2. **Accessible Town Centre**

Larkhall is a suburban town located approximately 18 miles south east of Glasgow. At settlement level the 2011 Census recorded a population of 14,951 people, however, by 2016 the mid-year population estimates record an increase to 18,319 people. Larkhall’s core retail area is focused on Union Street, a busy B-class road leading to Hamilton to the north-east and which connects to the M74 motorway onward to Glasgow and West Central Scotland.

The town is very well connected by bus and train to central Scotland and the wider South Lanarkshire area, and is around 25 miles from Glasgow International Airport. While the town centre is well-served by bus routes, the train station is located within the town centre, just a c. two minute walk from the main retail area. Trains to Glasgow city centre take around 40 minutes and run every 30 minutes or so throughout the day. There are Park & Ride facilities at Larkhall train station with 214 spaces.

Although there is no allocated bus station within Larkhall, there are a number of bus stops spread throughout both the town centre area and wider settlement. Buses from Larkhall to Glasgow city centre run every 20 minutes or so during the day and every hour in the evening. These services take approximately an hour during the day and an hour and 15 minutes in the evening, but all journeys involve a change of bus in Hamilton.

Bus and train services also connect the town with other settlements across South Lanarkshire including Hamilton (10 minutes by bus and 10 minutes by train) and Cambuslang (one hour by bus, with a change in Hamilton and 25 minutes by train). Despite the proximity, public transport connections to towns in North Lanarkshire require changes and have lengthy journey times – Airdrie (1 hour 27 minutes by bus and 1 hour 20 minutes by train) and Motherwell (40 minutes by bus and 40 minutes by train).
Based on 2011 Census data, commuters from Larkhall typically commute to other settlements within South Lanarkshire (i.e. Hamilton and Blantyre) and to Glasgow – current available transport links support this.

Parking is available throughout the town centre area of Larkhall, with all of the on-street parking spaces being located on Union Street (approximately 80). There are a number of off-street car parks in the town centre area, one of which is located on Caledonian Road (approximately 40 spaces, free of charge for 90 minutes) which belongs to the Co-operative supermarket. There is also a public car park located on Wellgate Street which is free of charge for one hour and provides approximately 65 spaces to visitors. Another public car park in located on Academy Street, which offers approximately 30 spaces to visitors, free of charge for up to two hours.

There is a large off-street car park located at the ASDA supermarket on Broomhill Drive outside of the town centre area (approximately 230 spaces), however, spaces at ASDA are time restricted to two hours.

There is good signage within the town centre for those travelling by foot, car or bike, with the National Cycle Route 74 running past the town centre area. Despite this, the audit did not identify any cycle parking facilities that would encourage passing cyclists to stop in the town.

There can be a great deal of traffic travelling through the town centre area, especially on Union Street, however, there are ten sets of pedestrian crossing points from MacNeil Street at the southern end through to the top of Union Street at the northern end. Although these provide safe crossings for those on foot, particularly older and less physically able people, some of these crossing points are spaced quite far apart, which could encourage pedestrians to cross at unsafe points. A possible solution to this could be the introduction of other traffic calming measures such as speed bumps or other more pedestrian crossing points. The roads and pavements throughout the town centre area are generally in a good condition and have been well maintained, with no major trip/ fall hazards identified from uneven or cracked surfaces.

The town centre area provides access to local services which, alongside a mix of retailers and business services, includes a council office, two community centres, police station, and two doctors/ medical centres. There are also three commercial banks operating within the centre, TSB, Bank of Scotland and RBS, providing good access to ATMs and banking services for businesses and residents.
There are a number of primary schools and one secondary located on the edges of the town centre. These are all located within walkable distance of the town centre and will help to drive an element of footfall that will sustain Larkhall’s retail and service outlets.

There is 4G coverage available throughout the town, but there is no town-wide free WiFi, however, the library on Union Street does offer this. Aside from the library, the audit did not identify any cultural facilities within the town centre i.e. museum, gallery, cinema, theatre, historic property open to public, etc.
3. **Active Town Centre**

3.1 **Population and Housing**

According to the 2016 Scottish Statistics, the electoral ward of Larkhall (which takes in some of the surrounding area) has a population of 18,319 people, of which 1,817 live in, or are within walkable distance of, the town centre. Using the best fit area for the town centre zoned boundary identifies a total of 387 people, just 2% of the town’s total population, living within the immediate town centre area\(^3\). Over the past decade, the town centre population has decreased by 4% – this is in contrast to the average 5.5% increase recorded from 34 other YTA audited towns.

The housing within the town centre\(^4\) is a broad mixture of detached/semi-detached housing (38%), terraced housing (32%) and flatted accommodation (30%), with tenure split between private ownership (64%), social rented (23%) and private rented (11%). At 4%, the town centre has a slightly higher housing vacancy rate than the 3% average across Larkhall as a whole, creating opportunities to increase the TC population base. The 4% vacancy rate is slightly higher than the average found across 38 other YTA audited towns of 3.5%, and is similar to vacancy rates in Dumbarton and Irvine (both 4%).

\(^3\) 2011 Scottish Output Zones: S00131090, S00131099 and S00131149.

Of the housing in Larkhall town centre 70% are in council tax bands A, B and C. The streets surrounding the town centre shopping area are almost solely residential – primarily flats and detached/semi-detached houses – these provide a large catchment population for the town’s retail and service businesses.

The average purchase price of a town centre dwelling in Larkhall (£74,315) is lower than that of the town as a whole (£81,289). Prices in the town centre have increased by 24% in the decade to 2013, and by 34% in the wider town. In comparison with other YTA audited towns, Larkhall has a much lower average purchase price (YTA average of £103k from 36 YTAs) and lower average ten year increase (YTA average of 42% from 33 YTAs).

There is, however, significant variation across the audited towns, from £55k to £200k average price for town centre properties. Of the five towns identified as USP comparators, Larkhall has mixed results:

- Alexandria had a lower vacancy rate but higher average purchase price;
- Ardrossan had a lower vacancy rate and lower average purchase price;
- Blantyre had a lower vacancy rate and slightly higher average purchase price;
- Dumbarton had the same vacancy rate but lower average purchase price; and

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Irvine had the same vacancy rate and higher average purchase price.

All five towns recorded significantly higher ten year average price increases, ranging from 35% to 76%, an average of 59% compared with 24% in Larkhall.

### 3.2 Town Centre Employment and Business

One third (33%) of the 3,375 jobs in Larkhall are located in the town centre area. National statistics recorded 440 businesses within the settlement. The YTA street audit located 173 commercial/service units within Larkhall town centre, of which 89 are retail businesses – comparison/convenience/retail service.

Across 38 YTAs the average is one retail unit per 243 town population – at 206 Larkhall has a lower ratio. Typically, the higher the rate, the more the town’s retailers depend on custom from local residents – those towns with very low rates tend to be destination towns that rely on visitor spending. Other YTAs with similar rates include Irvine (225) which has a similar retail base with 144 retailers.

### 3.3 Town Centre Retail

The traditional town centre retail area is focused on Union Street which runs through the town centre and connects to adjacent streets, such as Caledonian Road and Raploch Street and where other retail units can be found.
This audit found that 6% of Larkhall’s retail units in the town centre were vacant, which is lower than the average retail vacancy rate across 36 YTA towns of 9.6%. This is lower than the rates for the five towns identified as USP comparators: Alexandria (18.7%), Ardrossan (16.3%), Dumbarton (15.9%) and Irvine (7.2%). The retail vacancy rate in Blantyre was 23% at the date of the YTA, but this was largely made-up of stores the retail parade at the Asda store that were deliberately vacated to enable redevelopment.

The nine vacant retail units in Larkhall are spread throughout the town centre area:

- five located on Union Street;
- one located on Caledonian Road;
- one located on McNeil Street;
- one located on Crossgate Street; and
- one located on Raploch Street.

Shops located within the town centre are typically open from around 9am until 5/6pm Monday to Sundays, with some shops closed all of Sunday.
The largest single use in Larkhall town centre is retail, accounting for 54%, which is higher than the 38 YTA average of 46%. This is higher than the rates for the five towns identified as USP comparators: Alexandria (45%), Ardrossan (30%), Blantyre (34%), Dumbarton (40%) and Irvine (51%).

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. – *15 convenience retailers were identified in Larkhall town centre including four bakers and four newsagents*;

- **Comparison Retail**: all other retail purchases comprising goods bought at infrequent intervals where consumers will compare and contrast products and prices – *35 comparison retailers were identified in Larkhall town centre*
which includes seven electronic stores, six clothes stores, five chemist/pharmacies, and three charity shops; 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. – 39 retail service operators were identified in Larkhall town centre, of which 29 are hair and beauty businesses.

The town has a variety of independent retailers, alongside a number of national chains. Key national retailers include Farmfoods, Specsavers, Boots and a Post Office.

The majority of retailers (85%) in Larkhall town centre are independently owned – substantially higher than 38 YTA average of 71% and giving the town centre a differentiated character. This rate is much higher than its USP comparator towns – Alexandria 65%, Ardrossan 75%, Blantyre (68%), Dumbarton 52% and Irvine 48%.

The majority of retail in Larkhall is spread along Union Street – independent traders on this street include 21 hairdressers/beauticians, six electronic stores, three
bakers, two florists, two butchers, a fishmonger and a greengrocer. Of the 12 national retailers four are chemists/pharmacies (two Boots, a Lloyds Pharmacy and a Semi-Chem), two charity shops (a Marie Curie and a British Red Cross), and two are opticians (a Specsavers and an Optical Express).

There are three commercial banks operating in Larkhall, all of which are located on Union Street, and provide a number of ATM machines. Other non-retail occupants include five places of worship, two doctors/health centres, a council office and two funeral directors.
4. Attractive Town Centre

4.1 Leisure Mix

Almost half of the leisure offering in Larkhall town centre (48%) is made up of evening economy uses. The evening economy comprises ten hot food takeaways, eight pubs/bars and three restaurants. The evening economy outlets are located primarily on Union Street and Raploch Street. Takeaways in the town centre include the Original India Indian Takeaway on Union Street and Cathay Cuisine Chinese Takeaway on Raploch Street. The pubs/bars include The Kaploch on Union Street and the Clydespace Bar on Wellgate Street. Some of the restaurants include Moon Garden Chinese Restaurant on Union Street.
Although there are no hotels in the town centre, there is a hotel located within the wider settlement area. The Roadstone Hotel is located nearer the M74 motorway and has wedding/ event space on site as well as a restaurant and bar.

4.2 Leisure Facilities

The Larkhall Leisure Centre is located just outside of the town centre area on Broomhill Road, and opened in 1966. The leisure centre has gym, health suite, swimming pool and soft play area and offers a range of programmed fitness classes on both pay-as-you-play and membership basis. The different services in the centre are open at various time throughout the week, but typically from 7am until 10pm Monday to Thursday, from 8am until 8pm on Fridays, and from 8:30am until 5pm on Saturdays and Sundays. There are proposals for upgrade of this facility as part of the Larkhall Community Growth Area project.

The Big Bird Nursery is located within the town centre area on Union Street, and is open daily from 7am until 6pm. This offers a range of nursery, after school and holiday care activities for children.

The Lighthouse is a community facility located on King Street within the town centre. Some of the services offered include a range of group activities, rooms events spaces to hire, and signposting of visitors to other local services. The Lighthouse is open daily from 9am until 8pm.

4.3 Attractions

There are no formal tourist attractions located within the town centre area or the wider settlement of Larkhall. Many attractions relate to the historic past of settlements (e.g. the David Livingston Centre and Bothwell Castle near Blantyre), and it is difficult in the current funding climate to secure grant/ commercial funding to develop new attractions. However, the creation of more entertainment facilities possibly cinema, theatre or music events space within Larkhall, would provide for the local residents and might attract people from the surrounding areas. This would help to raise the profile of the town and generate new spend through a cultural offering.
That being said, there are some attractions which – although they are not located in Larkhall – are fairly close by including Chatelherault Country Park and Cadzow Castle within the Park. Chatelherault Country Park is located to the south east of Hamilton (2.7 miles/ 7 minutes by car from Larkhall). Only the ruins of Cadzow Castle, which was built in the 16th century, remain, and are owned and managed by Historic Scotland. Visitors can view these ruins from footpaths within the park.

Chatelherault Country Park is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and contains 500 acres of countryside and woodlands. Other facilities include a children’s playground, picnic area, visitor centre, café and gift shop.

4.4 Historic Town Centre

There are no conservation areas within Larkhall town centre area, however, there are a number of listed buildings.

One listed building is St Machan’s Parish Church on Church Street. This is a Category B listed building which was built in 1835, but has had a number of additions made to it throughout the years including the large spire. The building is in good condition and is used to date as a place of worship.

Another listed building is Trinity Parish Church on Union Street which is a Category B listed building, built around 1900 and designed by Alexander Cullen. The church is of Gothic-style and has a rectangular tower. The audit noted that the building is in good condition and continues to be used as an active place of worship.
Larkhall Community Council

Although the South Lanarkshire Council website states that there is a local Community Council for the Larkhall area, there is no website for them and their Facebook page has not been updated since the end of 2013.

4.5 Community Events

The Larkhall Gala Day is an annual event which is held on the grounds of Larkhall Academy just outside of the town centre area. It is organised by local people and takes place from 12 noon until 4pm typically on a Saturday in May. Some of the attractions include a fun fair, craft stalls, food and drink stalls, and a parade. All are invited to attend and an all-day wristband costs £5.

The Larkhall Gala Day Committee also organised the first Christmas Street Market Fair in 2017. The event took place on Friday 1st December from 5:30pm until 9pm. The Fair was held in the town centre area of King Street and Caledonian Road and saw a number of attractions including: market stalls, food and drink stalls, a stage to showcase local talent and a Santa’s Grotto.

4.6 Place and Quality Impressions

The YTA includes an independent review of place and quality impressions, with Larkhall scoring below average in comparison with other towns. Individual unit fronts and shop window displays were graded out of ten during the on-street audit, with a town centre average score of 6.4 for the condition of unit fronts and 6.0 for quality of window display. This is below the average across other audited town centres, of 6.9 for window displays and 6.9 for building fronts.

As part of the YTA audit a sample of businesses are asked to comment on their past performance and future confidence. It proved difficult to obtain feedback in Larkhall and only six responses were achieved. Results therefore need to be treated with caution, and are reported to provide comparison with other centres.
Of the six businesses, employment remained static whilst turnover had remained static for some but increased for others over the past five years. Of the six, four businesses are confident about the future performance of their business in Larkhall town centre. The overall confidence score for Larkhall is 7.8 / 10 which substantially higher than the average of 5.7 / 10 from 31 YTAs.

The audit identified that there is a lot of business signage clutter throughout the town centre area, with a number of businesses placing sandwich board advertising out on the streets. These clutter and congest the pavements, and could be reduced.

The town centre area is, however, generally well kept, with a number of new and modern benches, bins and bus stops throughout the area but some older bus stops are still in place – replacing these would improve the town’s setting. Roads and pavements are also in good condition with the audit noting few potholes and damaged areas, and there are a number of well-kept flower boxes throughout the centre which helps to brighten up the area.
5. **YTA Summary and Key Points**

The following are offered as final comments on the Your Town Audit of Larkhall within the framework of the Scottish Government’s Town Centre Toolkit. Overall, it is an attractive and thriving town centre with a relatively large commercial centre (compared to its population base), broad mix of uses and low level of vacancy.

5.1 **Accessible Town Centre**

- Larkhall is well connected with good public transport links and services – while car ownership in the area is high, regular bus and train services connect across South Lanarkshire, Glasgow and further afield creating good access for people visiting Larkhall town centre and also for residents travelling to work/study elsewhere;

- the location of Larkhall and its town centre are likely to support its vitality and sustainability – it is far enough away from larger settlements (East Kilbride, Hamilton and Glasgow) to retain its local catchment so long as the broad mix of uses remains e.g. retail/business/finance/education/health;

- the availability of train services and bus services support the needs of commuters from Larkhall to reach other settlements in South Lanarkshire and Glasgow for work and study;

- there is a suitable level of parking in Larkhall town centre with a number of both off-street and on-street spaces to encourage visitors to the town centre;

- there are no bicycle parking facilities within the town centre, and addition of such could help to increase uptake of cycling by residents, and with additional signage/promotion could encourage those on the nearby National Cycle Route 74 to stop and use the town’s food and drink traders; and

- Larkhall has good 3G/4G mobile phone coverage, but no town-wide free WiFi connectivity for town centre visitors.
5.2 Active Town Centre

- Larkhall has a population of 18,319 and a workplace based population of 3,375 people – of these 1,817 and 1,100 respectively are within, or within walking distance of, the town centre giving businesses a large potential catchment to draw custom from;

- South Lanarkshire Council are progressing with plans for 1,000 new family homes to be built to the north of Larkhall, which could provide a major boost in footfall and spend in the town centre – it is important that good physical connections into the town centre are established;

- of the 963 residential properties within the town centre catchment area just 32 are recorded as vacant, equating to 4% which is slightly higher than the overall YTA average of 3.5% from 38 towns – combined with the lower than average house price in Larkhall and increasing trends toward town centre living there may be an opportunity to secure redevelopment of these empty homes and also attract new residential development in other parts of the town centre;

- at present Larkhall records a very low level of vacant units with only 5% of all properties and 6% of retail units being vacant compared with 10% for 36/38 YTA average;

- there is a high proportion of independent retailer chains (85% compared with the YTA average of 71% from 38 towns), which could create an opportunity for the town to promote its unique and independent business base. These independent businesses are likely to be strong allies in supporting future events/activities in the town centre to increase footfall;

- a more varied retail offering would help to increase visitor numbers to the town centre area, as retail currently is dominated by service businesses (e.g. hairdressers) and by convenience stores. However, with much shopping being moved online it is hard to predict the retail requirements of residents and visitor to the town centre area. Other towns are focusing regeneration on the back of non-retail uses e.g. cultural/residential/community activities;

- hosting both the Larkhall Gala Day and the Christmas Street Market Fair shows that the community is active in creating and maintaining a sense of local culture; and

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Scottish Statistics Mid-Year Population Estimate 2016, Larkhall electoral ward
there are no tourist attractions within Larkhall and the addition of cultural and leisure activities (i.e. cinema, theatre, events venue etc.) would broaden the offer for residents. A number of towns have used vacant retail or other business premises on both short-term and permanent basis to expand the cultural and leisure offer.

5.3 Attractive Town Centre

- the majority of leisure offering in Larkhall relates to food & drink (75%), and although there is a library there is very little in the way of cultural offering (i.e. cinema, museum, theatre or nightclub) within the settlement;
- the evening economy in Larkhall is very much dominated by takeaways and bars/ pubs in terms of the mix of uses, and evening economy accounts for almost half of all leisure businesses (48%);
- while drawing from a very small base (six), most (four) businesses were confident about the future performance of their business in Larkhall town centre. The overall confidence score for Larkhall is 7.8 / 10, substantially than the average of 5.7 / 10 from 31 YTAs;
- the appearance of shop fronts and window displays in Larkhall were rated as 6.4 / 10 for building fronts and window displays at 6.0 / 10 – these scores are slightly lower than the averages from 34 YTAs is 6.9 / 10 for building fronts and 6.9 / 10 for window displays. While far from being a major issue, the town centre would benefit from a focused effort to improve maintenance and visual merchandising; and
- whilst the pavements and roads are in good condition there may be an issues around business signage clutter on the pedestrian areas which could be addressed to keep these areas clearer for pedestrians. Further investigation would be needed to understand the extent to which display board create obstacles or trip hazards for pedestrians, particularly elderly and less physically able people.