

Chapter 2

Alexandria – The Place





Christie Park

2.1 Town Centre Character Appraisal

History / Growth

The town of Alexandria was a product of the industrial era. Until the early 19th century it was little more than a road junction, with a grocery store and a famous oak tree (finally felled in 1865) close to the site of the Smollett Fountain. Some have claimed that the pre-industrial settlement was actually known as The Grocery, but it appears that the modern name – the township was named after Alexander Smollett – had been adopted by 1788. By this time bleaching operations had been introduced to the Vale of Leven, to be followed by the calico printing and Turkey red-dyeing which made Alexandria one of the most important textile towns in Scotland.

Previously, Alexandria was “an ill-planned, straggling and rather mean-looking place where every bit lairdie planted down his ain bit biggin anywhere he liked”.¹ But in the 19th century a modern industrial town began to take shape. The core of the modern street layout – which remained intact until the 1970s – was largely in place by 1830. In 1836 a suspension bridge was built over the River Leven linking Alexandria with Bonhill. There were further waves of urbanisation from the 1850s (when the railway arrived) and again in the 1870s and 80s. The last quarter of the 19th century was the town’s heyday: immigrants, initially



Figure 1: 1897 Historical Plan

from the Highlands and later from England and Ireland, were attracted by employment opportunities and fuelled population growth. In this period churches, commercial and civic buildings and gridded streets of houses sprang up, often built in the town’s distinctive red sandstone.

Though only a few public buildings were more than two storeys in height, contemporary photographs reveal a handsome, substantial town with a strong and consistent

¹ Quoted in John Gifford and Frank Amiel Walker, *The Buildings of Scotland: Stirling and Central Scotland* (Yale University Press, 2002)

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Alexandria Library Learning Centre



Vale of Leven Bingo Hall

urban form and a distinctive character. Several of the key buildings of this period survive and some are of real distinction, notably the Gilmour Institute (much influenced by Alexander Thomson) and the “astonishing” women’s institute (now Masonic Temple) by John A Campbell of John Burnet, Son & Campbell.

The Vale of Leven Co-operative Society was founded in Alexandria in 1861, and became one of the most successful and influential societies in Scotland. The rise of popular leisure was reflected in the remarkable success of the famous Vale of Leven Football Club which won the Scottish Cup in three successive years (1877-79). In the early 20th century there were cinemas, public halls and a theatre; Christie Park opened in 1902; trams arrived in 1907, although the service ceased in 1928. By 1901 the population of the town had increased to 8,000.

This period saw a new chapter in the area’s industrial history, with the arrival (in 1906) of Alexander Govan’s Argyll Motors Limited, housed in a palatial factory on the

north side of the town. Govan died shortly afterwards, but the company stumbled on until 1914 when it went into liquidation. In 1915 Armstrong Whitworth began producing munitions at the site; in 1935 it became the Royal Naval Torpedo Factory, a naval establishment which continued through to the [1960s]: local people still call the Argyll Works (now converted into a shopping centre) the torpedo factory.

The middle years of the 20th century were not kind to the Vale of Leven and Alexandria, the area's principal town, was particularly hard hit. Manufacturing now accounts for only about 5% of employment in Alexandria. Alexandria and the other Vale of Leven towns became synonymous with joblessness, poverty and social deprivation. The traditional industries declined and successive recessions saw unemployment reach exceptionally high levels. Since the 1970s efforts have been made to attracting ward investment to the Vale, but – despite some notable successes - they failed to stem the tide of de-industrialisation.

In recent years there have been some signs of recovery, although there are still pockets of acute and persistent deprivation in the town (in Section 2.2). Some of the key changes have been housing-led; new homes have helped Alexandria to attract and retain working age families, capitalising on the town's favoured location, with easy access to employment opportunities in the city-region as well as to the National Park.



Argyll Motor Works, Alexandria, circa C1906

Land Uses

Figure 2 shows the current land uses in the town centre and further north. The heart of the town centre around Main Street, Mitchell Way and Bank Street comprises mixed use developments (predominantly flats above shops), retail and community infrastructure. There are a number of car parks, the largest between Mitchell Way and the railway line, dominating the environment and giving a negative impression. Isolated north of the town centre is the Lomond Galleries shopping centre, the former 'torpedo factory'.

A range of housing envelopes the town centre core: Victorian streets of terraces and villas to the west and south and 1970s redevelopment to the north of Bank Street. A scattering of established businesses are sandwiched by housing in the vicinity of North Street. Former industrial land along the western side of the railway is now derelict and suitable for future housing development. Other key derelict sites are the Kippen Dairy at the apex of Main Street and Bank Street and at Leven Street.

The Vale of Leven hospital is located out of town, on the approach from Balloch. Christie Park, north-west of the town centre is the main public park serving the town and a key recreational resource. The River Leven path provides a recreational route along the western side of the river.

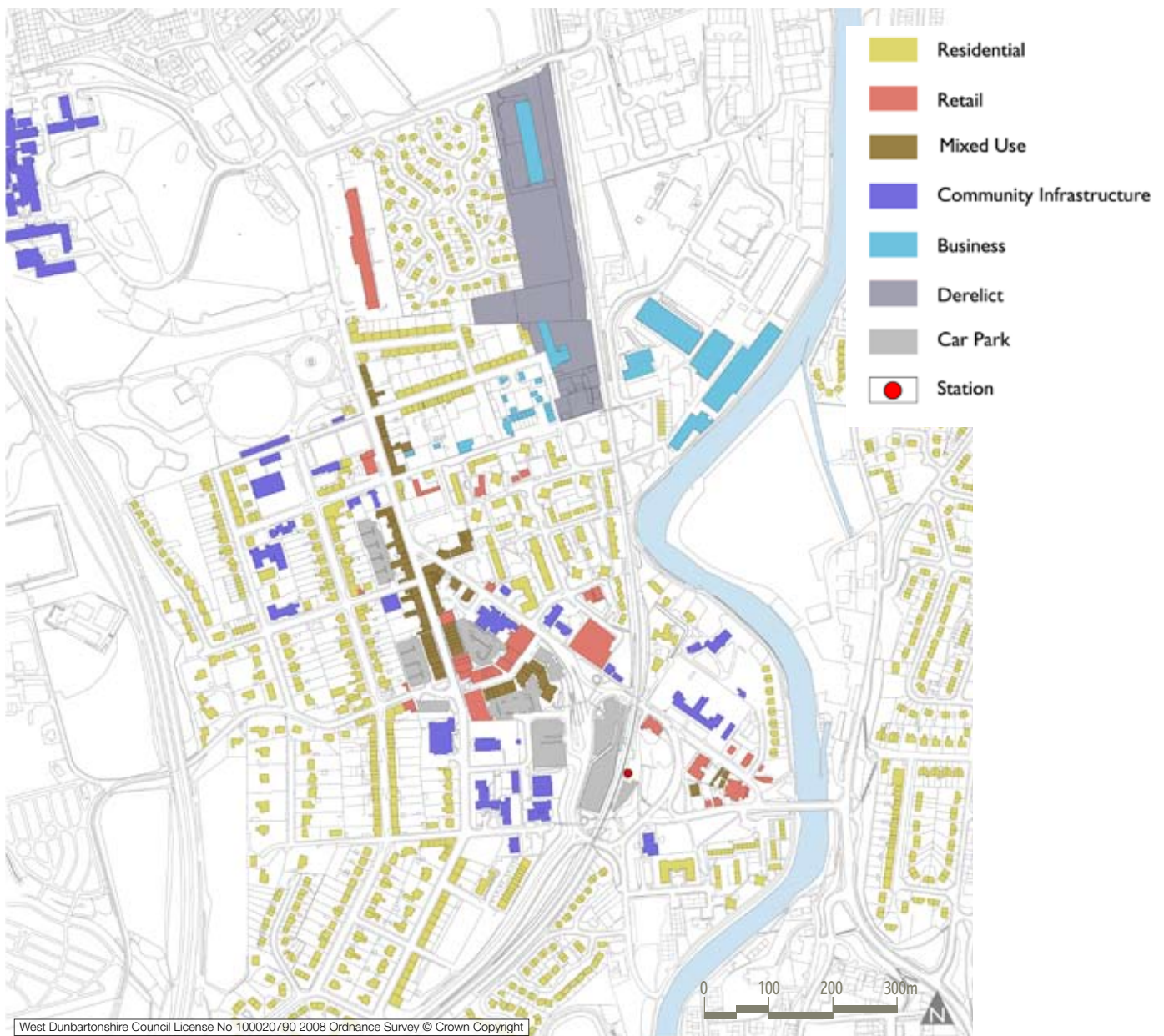


Figure 2: Landuse Analysis Plan © West Dunbartonshire Council

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Early 20th Century photograph of Alexandria looking westwards from Bonhill



Urban Design and Character Areas

Alexandria's long decline is reflected in the condition of the town centre. During the 19th century and first half of the 20th century the structure of the town centre centred on the triangle of Main Street, Bank Street and Bridge street coupled with a clearly defined grid of east-west and north south streets. The elevated railway line cut a north-south route through the town yet accommodated strong defined routes giving access to the River Leven.

The integrity of the 19th century urban form has been seriously compromised, most notably by developments in the 1970s which saw the insertion of the Mitchell Way shopping precinct on the east side of Main Street, as well as a disastrously over-engineered scheme of roads and pedestrian bridges which severed the town from the railway and the river and created a large "lost space".

Figure 3 summarises an analysis of the key urban design features of the town.

There are three principal arrival points: at the Argyll Works building with its imposing red sandstone frontage on the approach from the north, Bonhill Bridge over the River Leven from the east and the B857 from the south.

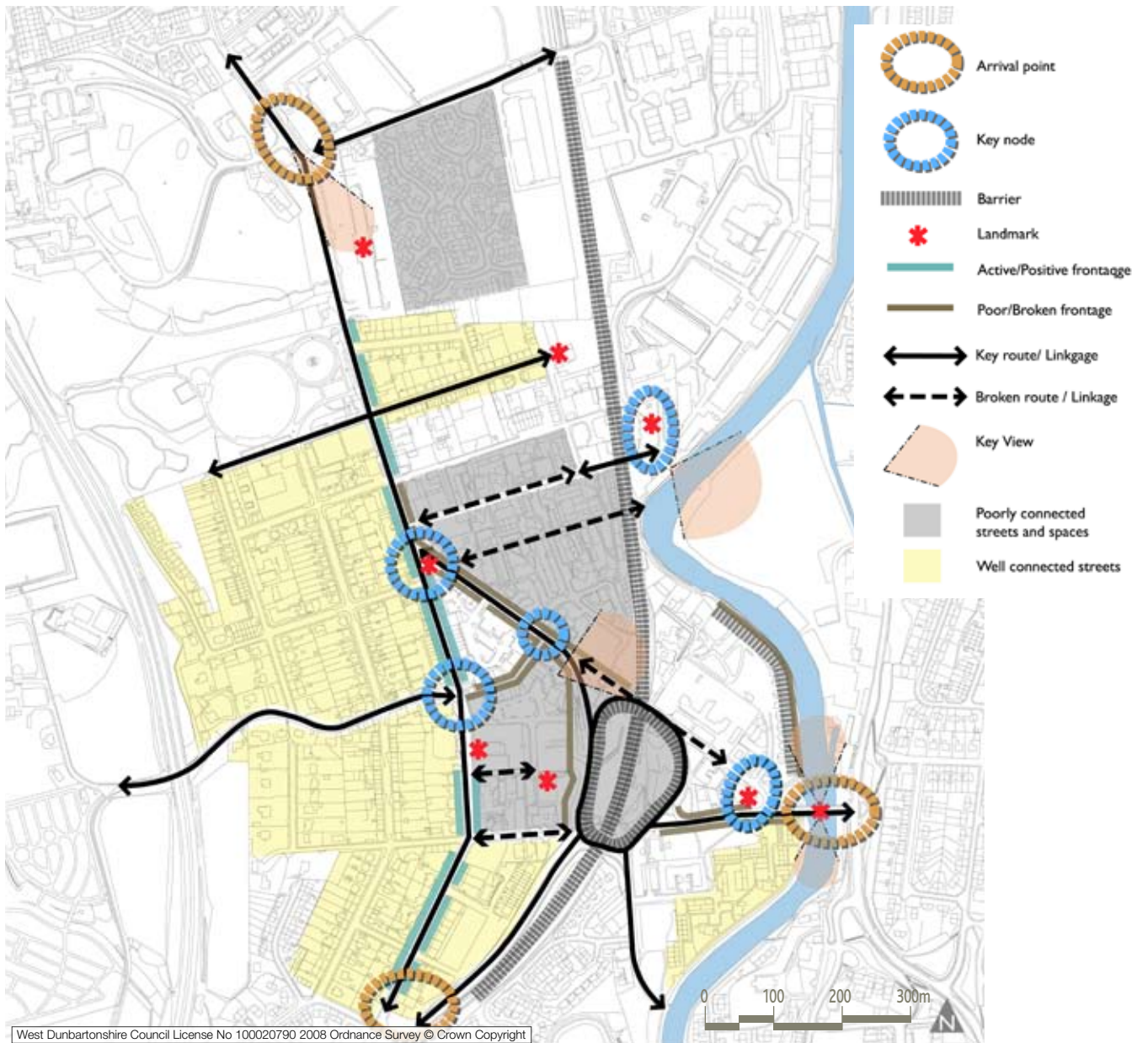


Figure 3: Urban Design Analysis

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The elevated railway line is a barrier that cuts through the town from the south west to the north. The one-way ring road gyratory is a key barrier within the town centre, inappropriate to the scale and fabric of the town, severing large tracts of land which are isolated and underused.

Key nodes include the Main Street/Bank Street junction where the Smollett fountain is a principle historic landmark, further south along Main Street at the junction of Overton Street and Mitchell Way, and at the other end of Mitchell Way where it connects to Bank Street. The Vale Bingo Club at the confluence of Bank Street and Bridge Street is another key node and historic landmark building in the town.

Well connected streets and spaces are located primarily to the west of Main Street and south of Bridge Street. The majority of the town centre is by contrast poorly connected by streets and spaces, as is the recent residential development at Davies Drive, which is an ill-defined layout of culs-de-sac which relates poorly to its principal frontage of Heather Avenue.

The town is characterised with a number of streets with poor or broken frontages. The key culprits are:

- Bank Street north of St Mary's primary school extending along Main Street to North Street
- Mitchell Way, and
- Bridge Street.

The key broken routes or linkages are along Bank Street, Alexander Street and Suzannah Street.

Gyratory System: The introduction of this road system essentially destroyed and ripped the heart out of the southern part of the historical triangle. The traditional layout of enclosed streets was lost giving way to large car parks, changes in level and exposing unsightly views of the rear of the Mitchell Way shopping mall. The creation of the ring road physically cut into the landform resulting in changes of level and the construction of an elevated car park along the west side of the railway line and numerous retaining walls. Pedestrian over bridges were introduced to allow ease of pedestrian movement but are unpopular and rarely used nowadays.

Centred on either side of the railway tracks, the gyratory leaves the railway station isolated and poor access to the town centre is compounded by the lack of a platform on the western side of the tracks.

Mitchell Way: The pedestrianised shopping and residential area of Mitchell Way has deteriorated in condition and appearance over recent years and this aspect has been confirmed in a recent survey of Mitchell Way residents. Around a third of the ground floor shop units are vacant and although there has been some refurbishment of the public realm in recent years the overall impression is still bleak. The narrow east-west alignment together with heavy duty canopies along one side results in a shaded environment. This is compounded after hours due to a lack of activity. Exposed views to the rear service and car parking areas from the southern B857 approach adds significantly to the overall negative view of the town centre.



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Main Street: The northern part of the Main Street dominated by red sandstone buildings survived the 1970s partial demolition of the town centre and has remained relatively intact. The street has several attractive historic buildings, most notably the Bank of Scotland and there are a series of vennels and passages between buildings linking into rear car parks and service areas. The historical Smollett fountain is the main civic landmark in the town and acts as an entry marker into the town centre from the north despite its poor setting amongst traffic clutter and derelict land opposite. Recent investment in shop fronts and new street lighting has provided a welcome boost. However, the street is dominated by vehicles, on-street car parking is undefined, and pavements are narrow creating a poor pedestrian environment. Overall it lacks warmth due to the dominance of tarmac and a lack of quality paving materials and furniture.

The middle part of the street was rebuilt at the same time as Mitchell Way with heavy canopied shop units and grey render facades above. This section lacks character in part due to a small and uninspiring car park and area of open space at the junction of Overton Road, the ramps and steps at the pedestrianised entrance to Mitchell Way opposite, the over dominance of pedestrian guard rails, and the Community Education Centre building further south.

The southern part of Main Street has retained most of its historic character, with the spire of St Andrew's Church (now a play centre) dominating the skyline. There are opportunities to reconnect adjoining streets to the west, namely Church Street and Bridge Street with the masterplan proposals.

Western Town Centre: The attractive and predominantly housing area to the west of the town centre is characterised by red sandstone terraces and houses. Its grid layout has remained largely unaltered since the early 20th century and is a desirable residential area.



Eastern Town Centre: As in many other 20th century residential developments, much of Alexandria's public housing consisted of towers and housing blocks out of keeping with the traditional grid layout and scale of the traditional Victorian buildings. The four storey apartment blocks built at a 45° angle to the street grid are a clear example and there is a surprising juxtaposition of single and two storey terraced housing and retail units in the shadow of four and five storey apartment blocks. This poorly defined urban structure lacks consistency of architecture, leading to a loss of character and identity for the town. There is an opportunity to replace these angled blocks with new quality housing that respects the street grid.



A significant and visible gap site is the site of the former Kippen dairy on Main Street, opposite the Smollett fountain, on one of the key approaches into the town centre. Frontage development should be reinstated to a high quality.



Some sections of the original street grid, most notably the east-west routes along Alexander Street and Suzannah Street have been blocked off to vehicles, leaving behind culs-de-sac arrangements and undefined spaces. Where possible the street sections, where they have become detached, should be reinstated, to improve links to the River Leven.



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Bank Street has suffered from the introduction of the gyratory system and a combination of factors that has led to the development of many architecturally uninspiring buildings, left over undefined areas of space and gaps sites along its length. There is an opportunity to focus on upgrading its status as a key side of the 'Alexandria triangle' and emphasise its future role as the key route for traffic round the south and east of the town centre, thereby shifting through traffic away from the Main Street. Avenue tree planting, straightening the street and other streetscape improvements would strengthen its role as a pedestrian and cycle route between the river and the north of the town centre. The railway bridge should be emphasised as a gateway entry feature to the town centre from the south.

Redefining the street frontage, particularly at its northern end will help to knit back some of the built fabric of the town centre.

The Western Riverside: The town benefits from a continuous walkway along the western side of the River Leven. Linkages to the river have fortunately been

maintained, despite extensive redevelopment over the years. Unfortunately recent housing near Bonhill Bridge has turned its back on the river. Small open spaces provide access near India Street at the northern end of the town centre and Bridge Street at the southern end. A lack of signposting, seating and other streetscape components needs to be rectified at both spaces and along the River Leven path to encourage more frequent use by pedestrians, cyclists and other leisure users.

The 2004 Town Centre Action Plan ² describes the environmental quality of Alexandria Town Centre as "poor" and says that the town "has lost its sense of place". This is still the case, although it should be noted that cosmetic improvements to some traditional shops in and around Main Street have given the town a modest lift. Fundamental problems remain, but the deterioration noted in the Action Plan appears to have been stabilised. The 2006 Land Use Consultants study describes Alexandria's "fragmented urban structure which consists of extensive remains of the Victorian core, interrupted by gap sites, traffic circulation interventions and twentieth century housing and retail areas". ³



² *Alexandria Heart of the Vale (May 2004)*

³ *Land Use Consultants, Alexandria Heart of the Vale: Streetscape Design Guide (report for West Dunbartonshire Council, December 2006)*

2.2 Alexandria Socio-Economic Profile

Challenges Facing Post Industrial Towns

The challenges facing Alexandria are typical of many post-industrial towns in the west of Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. Very similar conditions are found in parts of North and East Ayrshire, Inverclyde and North Lanarkshire. As a general rule these towns found it hard to adapt to changing conditions and the decline of traditional staple industries: there was a mismatch between the skills and aspirations of the local labour force and the jobs being created in the growing service sector industries, which made the post-industrial towns less attractive as the location for new industries. Often the problems were compounded by a lack of housing choice and other (real or perceived) quality of life issues which resulted in the young, better educated and economically active migrating to other places. Population declined and the demographic profile became increasingly elderly

In recent years there has been something of a bounce back as the former industrial towns have seen an increase in house building, especially in the lower and mid price range. Combined with investment in social housing, there are signs that this has helped to stem out-migration, to encourage people with families to stay and to attract new residents. However, while residential-led regeneration has helped to refresh previously declining communities and make them more sustainable, this has not necessarily resulted in the regeneration of town centres.

The traditional functions of small and medium-sized town centres have been under threat for generations. Two key – and connected – factors account for this. First, there has been a sustained long-term increase in average household incomes, which means that most people are better off than ever before. People have more disposable income and more choice about how – and where – to use it. Second, people are more mobile than ever before: there has been a huge increase in the number of households with access to a car, and often two or more. Taken together, these trends mean that communities are much less dependent than they used to be on local shops and services, accessed on foot or by public transport. The result has been a collapse in loyalty to local centres for shopping, leisure and other trips. People living in Alexandria and similar towns now have access to the facilities and attractions of the wider city-region. Small town centres have been squeezed by the competing attractions of large cities like Glasgow, out-of-town shopping centres and large supermarkets.

Of course, not everyone has a car or enough money to take advantage of these new opportunities. A substantial minority of residents is too young, too old or too poor to exercise any real choice. These people represent a captive market of residents who are still dependent on their local town centre for shopping and other services. Because these are typically low-income individuals (higher income residents are most likely to travel elsewhere to shop or for leisure trips) aggregate local demand is depressed, and there is a tendency for the quality of local shops and services to deteriorate: it is a vicious circle and another form, not always recognised, of social exclusion.

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Viewed from this perspective, the decline of small town centres like Alexandria is the result of powerful socio-economic forces. It is not “somebody’s fault”, and experience suggests that post industrial towns in particular face real challenges in carving out a new and sustainable role for themselves in the 21st century. If fixing small industrial towns was easy it would have happened already, but it is clear that the right interventions can make a positive difference; equally, errors such as the planning decisions made in Alexandria in the 1970s can rip the heart out of a town and make the situation even worse.

Many of the threats to the viability of small town centres are associated with the way we live at the start of the 21st century. This explains why, even in popular and prosperous small towns, local shops, services and amenities may struggle to compete. New housing may attract migrants from other areas, but these people are more likely to travel to work, shop and spend their leisure time in other locations.

There are no easy answers, but a review of recent best practice shows that a number of small post industrial towns have been the subject of successful regeneration. Notable examples include Calne (Wiltshire) and Wirksworth (Derbyshire), both of which have recovered from the demise of traditional industries and reinvented themselves as viable, communities with a sustainable demographic mix.

Socio-Economic Analysis

A settlement profile, based on the 2001 Census, is available for Alexandria. It shows that the population of the town was 13,444; most of the key indicators suggest that socio-economic conditions in Alexandria lag behind the Scottish average, but not dramatically so.

The age structure of Alexandria shows that the community has a smaller proportion of children and young adults, and a higher proportion of older residents (60+) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Age structure, Alexandria and Scotland, 2001

Age group	Alexandria %	Scotland %
0-15	17.79	19.20
16-29	15.85	17.46
30-44	22.41	22.97
45-59	20.42	19.29
60+	23.53	21.07

Source: Census of Population, 2001

A high proportion of households in Alexandria live in flats or maisonettes, with a small proportion of detached homes. Home ownership is below the Scottish average, while an above average number of households are Council rented properties. There is a high proportion of one-person pensioner households, and a high proportion of households without a car (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Households, Alexandria and Scotland, 2001

Household type	Alexandria %	Scotland %
Detached home	8.07	20.40
Flat/maisonette	43.04	35.58
Owner-occupied	58.50	62.59
Council rented	29.96	21.57
One person pensioner household	17.05	14.98
Household with no car/van	40.09	34.23

Source: Census of Population, 2001

The standard of health among 16-74 year olds in Alexandria is generally worse than in Scotland, partly reflecting the age structure of the community (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Key health indicators, 16-74 year olds, Alexandria and Scotland, 2001

Indicator	Alexandria %	Scotland %
Economically inactive who are permanently sick/disabled	24.64	21.25
In good health	63.56	67.91
In poor health	12.88	10.15
With limiting long-term illness	23.79	20.31

Source: Census of Population, 2001

The percentage of 16-74 year olds who are economically active is below the Scottish average: employment and self-employment rates are slightly below average, while unemployment was slightly above average (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Economically active 16-74 year olds, Alexandria and Scotland, 2001

Status	Alexandria %	Scotland %
In part-time employment	10.65	11.12
In full-time employment	39.33	40.25
Self employed	4.26	6.60
Unemployed	4.86	3.97
Full time student	2.82	3.03
All economically active	61.94	64.97

Source: Census of Population, 2001

Even though the share of manufacturing employment in Alexandria is now very low (see below) an above average proportion of local residents with jobs work in the sector, indicating that many must travel to work elsewhere in the Vale of Leven or beyond. Despite the fact that the Vale of Leven Hospital is easily the largest employer in Alexandria, the proportion of local residents working in the health and social work sector is only slightly above the Scottish average, indicating that many hospital staff commute from other areas (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Industry in which residents are employed, Alexandria and Scotland, 2001

Sector	Alexandria %	Scotland %
Manufacturing	16.37	13.65
Wholesale/retail/repairs	12.34	13.30
Hotels and restaurants	7.30	4.95
Financial intermediation	2.92	4.74
Real estate/business services	9.49	11.42
Public administration	12.10	7.23
Health and social work	13.09	12.63

Source: Census of Population, 2001

Generally, fewer local residents work in managerial and professional occupations, while more work in manual and elementary occupations (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Occupation of employed residents, Alexandria and Scotland, 2001

Sector	Alexandria %	Scotland %
Manager/senior officer	10.54	12.63
Professional	8.22	11.20
Admin and secretarial	14.80	13.03
Skilled trades	12.32	12.59
Personal/customer service	8.05	7.33
Process and plant operative	10.76	9.97
Elementary occupations	13.52	11.79

Source: Census of Population, 2001

Alexandria has an above average proportion of working age residents who have no educational qualifications, and a below average proportion of people with degrees of equivalent qualifications (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Highest qualification of working age residents, Alexandria and Scotland, 2001

Sector	Alexandria %	Scotland %
No qualifications	39.63	33.23
Level 1	25.58	24.69
Level 2	14.89	15.65
Level 3	7.34	6.95
Level 4	12.56	19.47

Source: Census of Population, 2001

The 2005 Annual Business Inquiry (ABI) shows that there were 3,411 employee jobs in Alexandria. Given that the 2001 Census showed that about 5,000 residents of Alexandria were employees in employment it is clear that there is a net daily outflow of people travelling to work in other locations.

The 2005 ABI shows that compared with the Scottish average, Alexandria:

- has a smaller proportion of jobs in manufacturing, tourism and business services
- has an exceptionally high proportion of jobs in health care, mostly at Vale of Leven Hospital.

Micro-businesses dominate, although the picture here is broadly in line with the Scottish average (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Breakdown of business units by workforce size

Share of business units employing:	Alexandria %	West D %	Scotland %
1-10 people	81.0	73.1	79.5
11-49 people	15.9	21.7	16.0
50-199 people	2.7	4.4	3.7
200+ people	0.4	0.8	0.8
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Annual Business Inquiry, 2005

Figure 9 shows how total employment is distributed across businesses of different size. An above average share of employment is in micro-businesses, but also in large business units (principally the hospital).

Figure 9: Share of employment analysed by business size

Share of employees working in business units employing:	Alexandria %	West D %	Scotland %
1-10 people	24.2	18.1	18.7
11-49 people	25.4	31.4	25.6
50-199 people	14.7	25.2	24.0
200+ people	35.7	25.4	31.7
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Annual Business Inquiry, 2005

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) tracks a range of measures of deprivation at datazone level. Figure 11 shows the rankings for each of the datazones in Alexandria (most deprived =1; least deprived = 6505). The table is colour coded, and it shows that deprivation is concentrated in as small number of datazones, two of which are among the 5% most deprived areas of Scotland.

Figure 10: Deprivation in Alexandria, 2006

Data Zone	SIMD 2006 rank	Current income domain 2006 rank	Employment domain 2006 rank	Health domain 2006 rank	Education, skills & training domain 2006 rank	Housing domain rank 2004 & 2006	Geographic access domain 2006 rank	SIMD Crime 2006 rank
S01006265	2169	3325	2299	1707	2504	768	735	2752
S01006267	954	1557	1293	532	737	1272	1171	1245
S01006268	1520	2147	1675	1871	1236	1068	1519	516
S01006269	805	702	1034	2358	638	763	1105	1011
S01006271	1000	754	749	1304	2017	2252	3084	2229
S01006273	1336	1402	1809	1502	974	1084	1535	1771
S01006274	1653	1859	1095	2898	1705	1782	2703	2228
S01006276	1753	1696	1973	1158	2687	2727	3561	821
S01006279	894	1051	910	877	1268	2289	1856	594
S01006285	2424	2642	2216	2034	2879	2940	2776	1601
S01006288	168	124	164	343	608	1020	2569	343
S01006290	612	502	854	1164	551	1073	1097	2541
S01006291	300	289	487	153	519	626	1883	1747
S01006292	4297	4149	4273	4089	4639	5443	1468	3619
S01006293	5272	5892	5057	5383	5374	5402	928	6126

Key:

5% most deprived	10% most deprived	15% most deprived	20% most deprived
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Source: Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2006

A more fine-grained analysis of the SIMD shows that the principal sources of deprivation in Alexandria are low incomes, joblessness, poor health and low levels of education, skills and training; crime is a significant problem in some datazones.

Alexandria is changing, but the picture emerging from these official data sources is still of a community that is struggling to adjust to the challenges of life in the post-industrial era. As local employment has declined (the hospital accounts for a third of all jobs in the town) Alexandria has become a suburban community where a growing proportion of employed local residents travel to work elsewhere in West Dunbartonshire and beyond. But this process of economic adjustment coexists with persistent problems of poverty and exclusion. The low level of car ownership is revealing: although Alexandria is well connected by public transport many households are still dependent on the town centre for shopping and other services.

Market Conditions

Market conditions reflect this mixed picture. House prices have been rising steadily, but from a low base – they are still well below the Scottish average. However, the retail market is weak. A 2005 report by Culverwell states that “the town centre operates largely to provide local retail facilities”. The food offer is limited to the Aldi store (physically isolated on the east side of Bank Street), a 1,100 sq metre Somerfield store and small Farmfoods store. Together, these outlets offer restricted ranges, so that a high level of retail expenditure leakage is inevitable. There are a number of multiples represented in the town, but there have been several significant closures in recent years leaving the local fashion and consumer durables offer at a low ebb.

The Culverwell report stresses the fragility of Alexandria town centre, which is described as being “in slow decline”. At the time of publication, the number of void units in the town was low, but the consultants warned that the position “could deteriorate quite rapidly”. A number of businesses including the Co-op have subsequently ceased trading. The condition of Mitchell Way is highlighted as a particular threat: the shopping centre is in need of refurbishment, and the layout of the units (wide and shallow) is not attractive to potential occupiers.

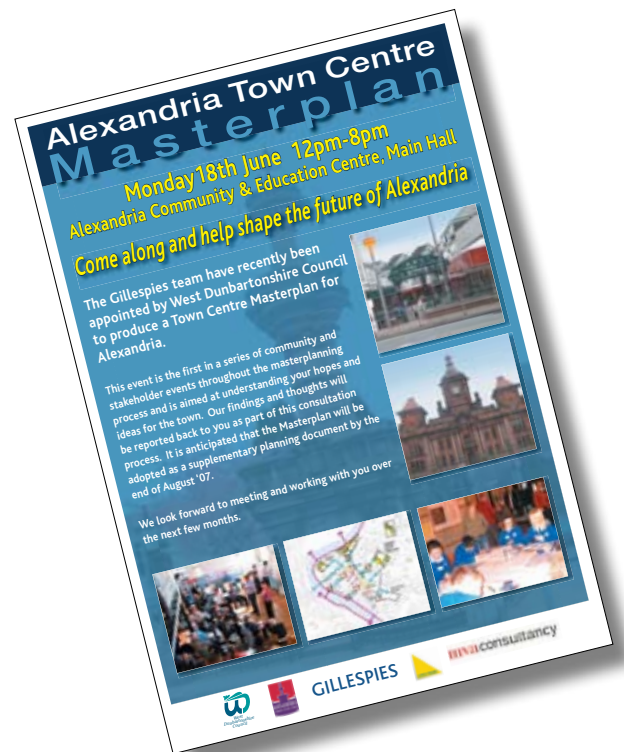
Culverwell were unable to identify any stated requirements for retail space, apart from Farmfoods who would like to relocate to a unit of up to 650 sq metres with car parking. However, they take the view that a number of multiples would consider taking up suitable space in the town.

The Loch Lomond Outlet Centre on the site of the Argyll Motor Works was redeveloped as a speciality shopping destination which would attract visitors to Loch Lomond Shores and the long-established Antartex Village, but it has failed to attract anticipated demand.

Stakeholder and Community Engagement

Through discussions with the community, local residents describe a town with a split personality. They enjoy Alexandria's still strong sense of community and distinctive identity; and they are proud of its history and heritage and of cherished places like Christie Park. There is also a keen appreciation of the town's potential, based on its position on the edge of a national park and its easy access to the city-region.

But these plus points are offset by a sense of frustration and disappointment. The long-term decline in the quality and status of the town centre is a constant refrain: Mitchell Way is perceived to be failing, and this is reflected in the decayed state of the buildings and the boarded up Co-op store; the 1970 road system with its pedestrian bridges is seen as an embarrassment. The quality of food shopping is perceived to be poor, and many people feel they have no choice but to go to Dumbarton or Clydebank to shop. The local people we engaged with recognised the importance of the town centre as a focus for social and community life albeit with some evident negative and persistent issues such as anti-social behaviour and crime.





These findings are broadly consistent with the results of a survey of pedestrians carried out by Land Use Consultants in 2006. In that survey about a third of those interviewed were unhappy with the quality of the shops and many were also concerned about empty shops and shop closures. Other concerns related to the appearance of the town centre, anti-social behaviour, safety and litter.

Community consultations carried out during the preparation of the Town Centre Action Plan focused on the town centre experience and revealed a series of likes and dislikes (Figure 11).

Figure 11: "What do you like or dislike about Alexandria?"

Likes	Dislikes
Sense of community/friendly	Lack of clear identity
Good transport connections	Out of date pedestrian bridges
Range of services/amenities	Poor quality shop fronts/streets
Free car parking	Poor signage
Flowers on Main Street	Untidy appearance – graffiti/litter

Source: *Alexandria Heart of the Vale: Town Centre Action Plan*

The consultations showed that local residents found the town centre accessible, walkable, friendly and sociable, but that there was a perceived need for better shopping choice and a better maintained town centre.

Community Engagement Event 1: Information Gathering

A public event was held in the Alexandria Community Education Centre on the 18th June 2007. This event ran over the course of the day and the public were invited to drop in and discuss the future of the town with members of the Masterplan team.

The following results were recorded:

Amenities / Services

When asked about the standard of amenities and services in Alexandria, the residents' response was that the town was quite badly provided for. A lack of social amenities, for example no cinema or public venues for events, mean people are forced to travel to other areas, something that is difficult for people who rely on public transport. There is strong concern about the future of the health centre, which residents feel must be kept in a central location which is easily accessible by all. These aspects have a detrimental effect on community spirit, something that residents feel could be improved by the organisation of local events and activities, such as concerts held in Christie park. Residents also expressed a desire to see more small shops in the area, and the promotion of events such as markets, both local and foreign, which would also help attract tourists.



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Buildings

The community feel that there are many good quality traditional buildings in the town which add character to the area. However, the appearance is damaged by the multitude of outdated concrete buildings, particularly by Mitchell Way and several other alley ways, which are often used as meeting places for anti-social behaviour and are felt to be unsafe. There is also a lack of good quality affordable new housing. Residents would like to see the town centre redeveloped, with housing associations being included in the plans, as well as a modern medical centre.

People

When asked about levels of community spirit, the attendees said they felt it was quite good, but that it was being affected by issues such as a lack of amenities. The presence of alcoholics and drug abusers in the town and parks, as well as groups of young people, can be intimidating and add to feelings that the area is unsafe. There is also felt to be a lack of communication, particularly between residents and local councillors. Residents however felt that the situation could be improved by the organisation of community functions, such as a Christmas pantomime or a summer fetes.



Public Places / Green Spaces

Alexandria residents feel that the existing public places and green spaces are generally good, but there is concern as to what impact further development could have on them. The area also suffers from graffiti and litter problems. It is felt more could be done to maintain and develop them and to make the areas more aesthetically pleasing and functional. This could be achieved, for example, by providing manned public toilets and encouraging coffee vendors, markets or other small businesses into these areas, making them more appealing to the general public. The town would also benefit from better children's play areas and an all-weather sports venue.

Safety

The general feeling of residents in Alexandria is that the town centre is unsafe, especially at night and in particular areas, such as Mitchell way. This feeling is brought about by a poor police presence and is exacerbated by issues such as few amenities, (for example no where for young people to go), a lack of lighting in areas such as the train station and the presence of substance misusers. It is felt that a stronger police presence and more CCTVs may alleviate the problems.

Shops

A lack of shops, and a poor variety in existing shops, is a big issue with Alexandria residents. It is recognised that the high rates of shop premises have a detrimental effect on businesses, causing many to close down and limiting what is supplied. Having to go to other areas, e.g. Dumbarton and Clydebank for most shopping is inconvenient. It is felt that the existing outlets could be redeveloped, along with new public toilet facilities and better disabled access.

Things To Do

In terms of social amenities, the residents of Alexandria feel that more could be done to accommodate the needs of the people. The present facilities, such as the swimming pool, are considered rather limited, due to access, opening hours and in the variety of activities offered. There is a lack of proper sports facilities and entertainment for young people, such as a cinema. People would also like to see a café with internet facilities, which is perhaps open after five o'clock.

Transport/Access

The general feeling of Alexandria residents is that transport links to the town could be improved upon. Whilst the current bus service is described by some as adequate, poor wheelchair user and pram facilities combined with badly planned routes mean it is not widely suitable. This issue would be of particular importance should the hospital be moved to Paisley. The town also suffers from a lack of parking space. The traffic problem is particularly bad in certain areas – for example at the bridge –when rush hour traffic causes a bottleneck effect. Freeing the main street of traffic and making better use of existing car parks are two suggestions which would help to alleviate the problem.

Stakeholder Engagement

A stakeholder meeting between residents of Mitchell Way and other key stakeholders was held on the 20th June 2007 where the future of Alexandria was discussed in detail. The results of Stakeholder engagement is summarised in appendix X and echo the feedback from the wider community event.

Regarding discussions with residents of Mitchell Way, the group was divided over whether, if nothing is done to improve the town centre, people would begin to move away from the area or not. The residents made clear their issues with the poor physical condition their homes, for example problems with rat infestation, dampness

and water getting into the buildings as well as general damage caused by vandalism and age. Residents brought photographs of the closes, which illustrated the extent of drug abuse, litter and cracks in the walls. In summary, the group agreed that whilst they enjoyed living in the town centre, they did not like living with the condition of their properties.

Mitchell Way Regeneration Survey

In response to the Stakeholder Meeting with Mitchell Way residents, the Council organised and carried out a resident survey of the residential properties in Mitchell Way. Research Resource (an independent research company) was appointed to undertake this survey, which was completed in December 2007. The results indicated that whilst the majority of residents were happy living in the town centre, there was support for the demolition of the properties and rebuild of new residential properties on the site (10 households favoured this option while 3 did not).

Community Planning Event 2: Presenting Options

In April 2008, West Dunbartonshire Council held a series of public exhibitions and meetings throughout Alexandria and the local area to explain the contents of the draft masterplan. Generally, there was support for the masterplan and the principles contained within the plan ;the redevelopment of Mitchell way, the retention of the medical centre in the town centre and the provision of a new supermarket in the town centre.