



# Your Town Audit: Helensburgh

March 2019



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## 1. Understanding Scottish Places Summary

This report presents a summary of the Your Town Audit (YTA) for Helensburgh, 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 Helensburgh 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 Helensburgh and identifies six comparator towns that have similar characteristics, with the most similar being Giffnock, Prestwick, Linlithgow and Bishopbriggs<sup>1</sup>. The USP platform – [www.usp.scot](http://www.usp.scot) – describes Helensburgh in the following **general terms**:

**Helensburgh's Interrelationships:** Helensburgh is an *'interdependent to independent town'* which means it has a good number of assets in relation to its population. These towns have some diversity of jobs; and residents largely travel shorter distances to work and study, although some travel longer distances. These towns attract people from neighbouring towns to access some of their assets and jobs.

**Helensburgh's Typology:** This type of large town is a suburban or commuter locality with a prevalence of higher income and private housing. A large proportion of the population are over 45, and many are retired. Many people own their home. There is also a high proportion of people in professional employment and a high proportion of residents are educated to HNC level or above. Many residents own two or more cars. *(In discussion with the Chamber, it is important to restate that the USP typology for Helensburgh is expressed in general terms and describes the type of town rather than Helensburgh specifically).*

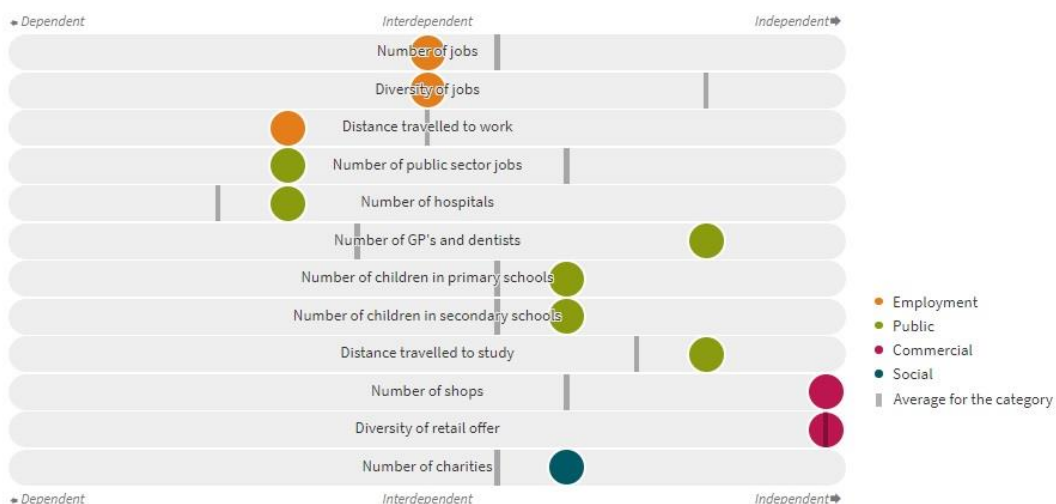
Comparing Helensburgh to towns with similar USP typology and interrelationships shows it has a similar number of charities, children in school, jobs, diversity of retail offer, and distance travelled to work and study. It differs most from similar towns with a greater reliance on public sector jobs (due to the naval presence).

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<sup>1</sup> Other comparator towns include Stonehaven and Ellon.

In comparison to similar towns, Helensburgh has more GPs and dentists, a higher number of shops per head, and less diversity of jobs.

## Inter-relationships 1



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

Our analysis of Helensburgh 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 Helensburgh town centre.

In total 41 YTA audits have been prepared for towns across Scotland providing consistent data across a range of KPIs. Where appropriate, this report provides comparisons for Helensburgh against the YTA town average<sup>2</sup>. In particular, a YTA has been prepared for one of the USP comparator towns defined earlier – Giffnock – and specific reference is made to this comparison where relevant.

<sup>2</sup> It has not been possible to collect full KPI data for all towns – the number of YTA comparator towns therefore differs across this report.

It is worth noting that planning, economic development, housing and a wide range of other policy areas now seek to place the community in an increasingly central role, driving forward change and progress. Most recently this is reflected in the Place Principle, launched late 2018:

**A principle for taking a place-based approach**

*"We recognise that:*

Place is where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose, and are at the heart of addressing the needs and realising the full potential of communities. Places are shaped by the way resources, services and assets are directed and used by the people who live in and invest in them.

A more joined-up, collaborative, and participative approach to services, land and buildings, across all sectors within a place, enables better outcomes for everyone and increased opportunities for people and communities to shape their own lives.

*The principle requests that:*

All those responsible for providing services and looking after assets in a place need to work and plan together, and with local communities, to improve the lives of people, support inclusive growth and create more successful places.

*We commit to taking:*

A collaborative, place based approach with a shared purpose to support a clear way forward for all services, assets and investments which will maximise the impact of their combined resources."

Improvement Service (December 2018)

## 2. Accessible Town Centre

Largely serving as a commuter town, Helensburgh is located in Argyll and Bute approximately 22 miles west of Glasgow on the northern side of the River Clyde. It is the largest town in the sparsely populated region and forms the administrative centre of the Helensburgh and Lomond area within the local authority of Argyll and Bute.

The current Local Development Plan (LDP) defined town centre covers from William Street along West Clyde Street to the bottom of Maitland Street. It includes the core retail area of Sinclair Street and Colquhoun Square extending northwards to West Argyle Street.

For the purpose of this audit, the town centre extends slightly beyond this area to include the edge of town centre as outlined in the LDP. Argyll and Bute Council is currently preparing a new LDP which is due for adoption in 2020.

In 2015, significant investment was made to improve accessibility within the town centre with £6.6 million supporting the redevelopment of the West Bay Esplanade, traffic management and streetscape improvements. This included narrowing roads, widening pavements, the creation of new parking bays, including on street disabled parking bays, and changing the traffic flow in the town centre.

These improvements have increased the number of on-street parking to approximately 100 spaces complimenting the 7 off-street car parks providing over 1,000 spaces throughout the town centre. On-street parking within Helensburgh is free for up to one hour. The majority of car parks are chargeable with the exception of Sinclair Street Car Park, which offers the first 2 hours of stay for free followed by a charge of £1 per hour, and Helensburgh Central train station which is £3 per day, refundable to commuters on ticket purchase. The lower part of the seafront park which is free is shortly to be removed.

15 mile radius around Helensburgh





Helensburgh is served by two railway stations, Helensburgh Central and Helensburgh Upper. One of the main commuter destinations for workers from Helensburgh Centre is Glasgow City Centre<sup>3</sup>. Helensburgh Central railway line provides a regular half-hourly service into Glasgow<sup>4</sup> and the central belt terminating at Edinburgh<sup>5</sup>. Helensburgh Upper is located on the West Highland Line, which runs between Glasgow and Oban on the west coast of Argyll. According to Visit Scotland, it is considered to be “one of the most scenic rail journeys in the world”<sup>6</sup>.

Trains are much less frequent on the Helensburgh Upper line than on the Central line, with the service varying significantly throughout the day. The Caledonian Sleeper, offering an overnight service to London, also calls at Helensburgh Upper.

Helensburgh has bus connections to Cardross, Glasgow, Dumbarton, Kilcreggan Coulpport, Vale of Leven Hospital and Royal Alexandra Hospital (Paisley). Whilst it is approximately 14 miles to the nearest motorway (M898), Helensburgh is in close proximity to the A82, which provides access to Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park in the north and Glasgow.

Within the town centre, there is good mobile connectivity with consistent broadband coverage across the four major network providers and superfast broadband capability. Following the trial of a pilot project in 2017, Argyll and Bute Council announced that it would no longer be offering direct provision of a free WiFi service in the town centre as a more appropriate role would be to focus on “facilitating third party services”<sup>7</sup>.

Overall, the town centre has a very good level of transport and digital connectivity.

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<sup>3</sup> DataShine Scotland Commute data shows that Glasgow City Centre South is the second most common destination for commuters from Helensburgh Centre. [Accessed online](#)

<sup>4</sup> Train journey lasts 42 minutes from Helensburgh Central to Glasgow Queen Street.

<sup>5</sup> Train journey lasts approximately 1 hour 50 minutes from Helensburgh Central to Edinburgh Waverley.

<sup>6</sup> Visit Scotland provides a 4 day itinerary for travelling on the West Highland line. [Accessed online](#)

<sup>7</sup> Argyll and Bute Council, Policy and Resources Committee (19 October 2017). [Accessed online](#)

### 3. Active Town Centre

#### 3.1 Population and Housing

The wider settlement of Helensburgh has a population of approximately 14,200<sup>8</sup> with roughly 1,750 people living within its town centre datazones<sup>9</sup>. At 12%, this is below the average for YTA towns (16%). The town centre population has decreased by 14% from 2001 to 2011. This is compared to a 3% decrease in the wider town which equates to around 400 people. The decreases in Helensburgh are amidst the backdrop of increases of 3% for Argyll & Bute and 5% for Scotland over the same period.

Other audited town centres have generally experienced an increase in town centre living with an average 5% increase across YTA towns. Although it should be noted that Giffnock, the USP comparator town, has seen marginal decreases in its town centre and wider settlement populations.

Almost all of the residential dwellings in the town centre are in flats (94%), typically three to four bedrooms, and just over half of all homes are owner-occupied (52%). In comparison to other YTA towns, Helensburgh has a significantly large proportion of privately rented housing (30% compared to 14% YTA average) and small proportion of social housing (16% compared to 29% YTA average).

Given Helensburgh's historic standing as a tourist destination, it is surprising that only 2.1% of housing within the town centre are second/ holiday homes – below the average for similar towns such as Largs (11%), Eyemouth (3%) and Moffat (3%). This may reflect most visitors being day trippers who do not stay overnight. Although feedback from the Chamber suggests that Helensburgh has experienced growth in the holiday rental market, specifically the short-term rental market e.g. Airbnb, with residential properties being bought for buy-to-let.

More than three-quarters of the dwellings in the town centre (78%) are in council tax bands A-C. This differs to the wider Helensburgh area where over a quarter of the dwellings (26%) are in council tax bands F-H. There is a significant number of vacant residential properties in the town centre (7.8% compared to YTA average of 3.6%).

<sup>8</sup> Includes four 2001 Intermediate Zones - S02000138, S02000139, S02000140 & S02000141.

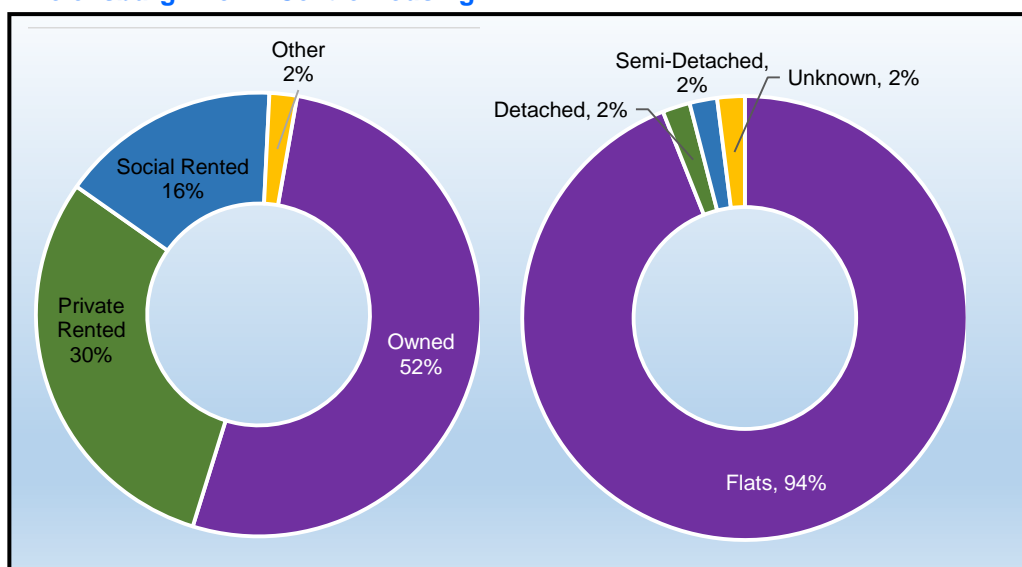
<sup>9</sup> Includes two 2001 Datazones - S01000768 & S01000769.



There can be a number of factors influencing high vacancy rates for residential properties in the town centre. Often, this can relate to the type and quality of available properties.

For example, there can be difficulty in bringing flats located above shops back into use due to a variety of reasons such as owners deliberately leaving properties vacant. Town centre living is a common issue throughout Scotland and is one of the priorities for the Scottish Government's Town Centre Action Plan<sup>10</sup>. The plan introduced a commitment to encourage more people to live in town centres supported by the £2 million Town Centre Housing Fund in 2015.

### Helensburgh Town Centre Housing Mix



## 3.2 Employment

Just under half (44%) of Helensburgh's 4,000 jobs are located in the town centre datazones. The YTA street audit located 141 businesses within Helensburgh town centre with national statistics recording 440 businesses in the wider settlement area. It should be noted that the largest employer in Argyll and Bute, the Ministry of Defence, employs roughly 6,500 people at a single site in nearby Faslane, a high proportion of whom travel from West Dunbartonshire<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Government (2013) Town Centre Action Plan [Accessed online](#)

<sup>11</sup> Commuter flow data shows that Garelochhead, where Ministry of Defence Faslane base is located, is the most common destination for workers from Helensburgh Centre. DataShine Scotland Commute [Accessed online](#) in July, 2019

### 3.3 Retail

**102 residents per town centre retail outlet**

**141 town centre retail units in use**

**19 vacant town centre units**

The retail offering in Helensburgh is fairly widespread although it is mainly concentrated in Sinclair Street, West Princes Street and West Clyde Street. We identified 141 retailer operators in the town centre area from a total of 262 units.

Overall commercial unit vacancy rate is 7.7%. Encouragingly, this is lower than most other audited town centres where there is an average retail vacancy rate of 9.6%.

Given that the retail offering in Helensburgh is across several streets, most of the vacant units are spread out. This is with the exception of a couple of vacant units at 39-43 East Clyde Street which, during the audit visit, was the site of large-scale scaffolding and repair works. As it is situated on one of the main roads into Helensburgh, this may adversely influence the initial impression of the town centre. Both of the businesses that formerly occupied these units, Helensburgh Cycles and Black Sails Tattoo Studio, have relocated to West Clyde Street.

Shops in Helensburgh town centre typically operate standard opening hours of around 9am to 5:30pm/ 6pm. The main supermarkets in the town centre, such as Co-operative Food<sup>12</sup> and the Tesco Metro store<sup>13</sup>, have longer opening hours closing at 10pm. It should be noted that Helensburgh is also served by a large Waitrose store which officially opened in 2013 and is located on Cardross Road opposite Hermitage Academy.

<sup>12</sup> Co-operative Food (Sinclair Street) opening hours: 6am to 10pm

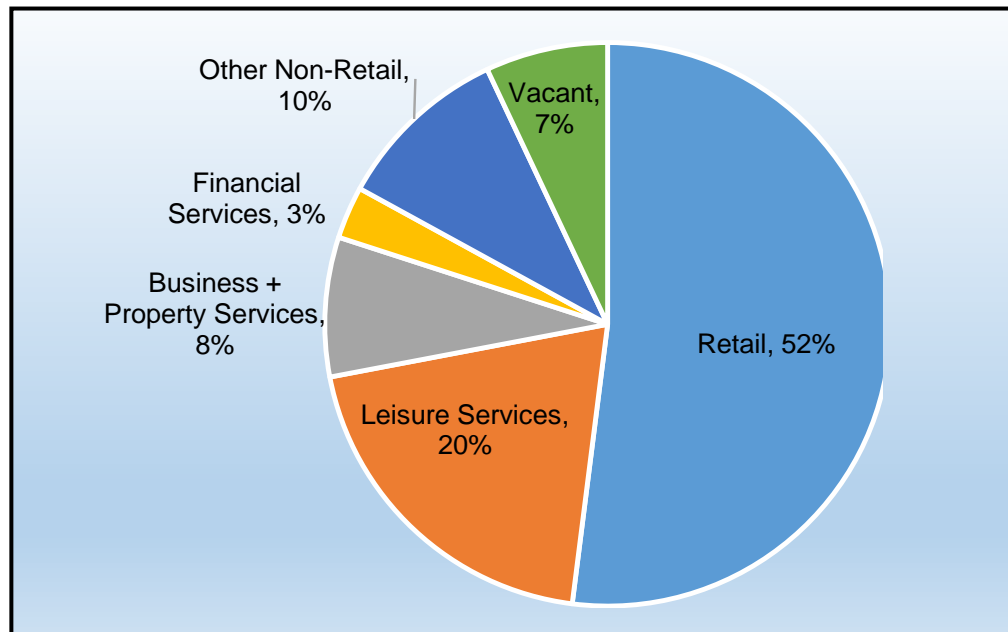
<sup>13</sup> Tesco Metro (Sinclair Street) weekday opening hours: 7am to 10pm, Saturday: 7am to 9pm and Sunday: 9am to 6pm.



In common with other audited town centre, retail forms the largest single unit use with 52% of all units. Given the USP classification of Helensburgh as an interdependent to independent town, it is unsurprising that this is higher than most other audited towns and similar to Giffnock.

This classification is further reinforced in the finding that for every 102 residents in Helensburgh, there is a town centre retail outlet. This is significantly more shops per head than other audited towns where there is an average of 236 residents per town centre retail outlet.

### Helensburgh Town Centre Unit Mix

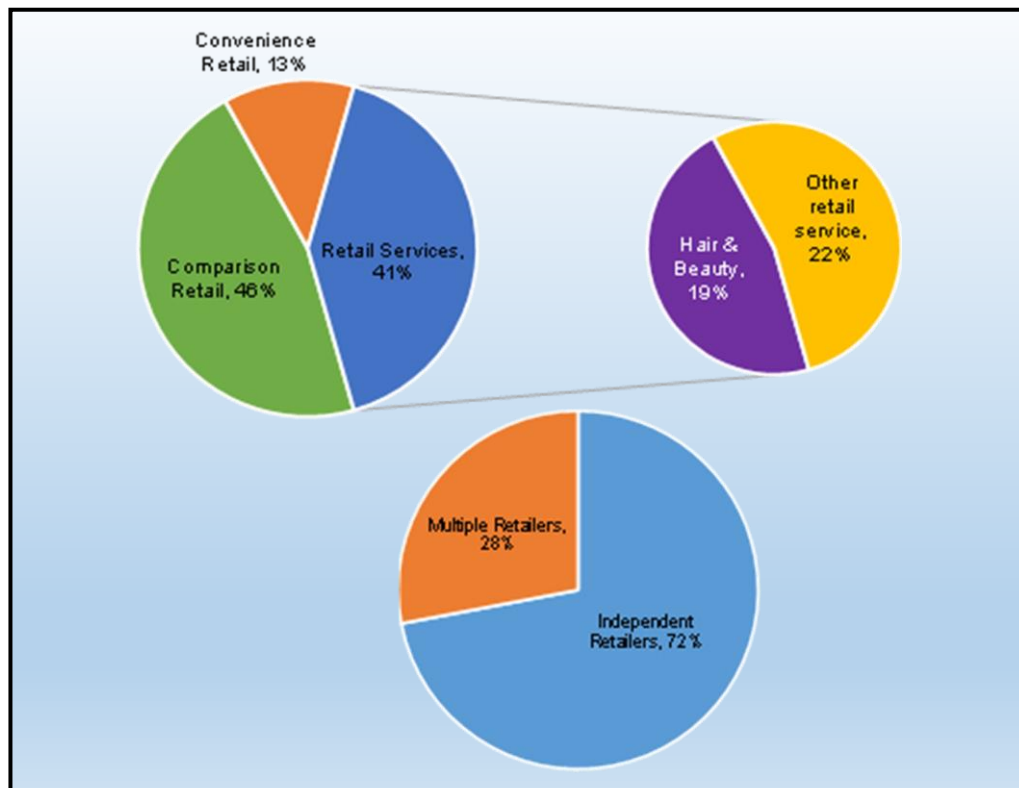


The YTA analysis is based on the following retail definitions:

- **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 – *17 convenience retailers identified in Helensburgh town centre;*
- **Comparison Retail:** all other retail purchases comprising goods bought at infrequent intervals where consumers will compare and contrast products and prices – *63 comparison retailers identified in Helensburgh 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 – *56 retail service operators identified in Helensburgh town centre.*

The town centre can be split into several sub-areas based on unit use. For example, several of Helensburgh's business and property services are located on Colquhoun Street. It should also be noted that business and property services comprise a greater proportion of unit use in Helensburgh town centre than compared to the YTA average across all audited towns (8% compared to 5.2% average). Similarly, there are a range of gift shops and award-winning restaurants throughout the town, some of which are located on East Clyde Street taking advantage of the scenery and footfall at the waterfront. Therefore, these areas each have their own strong identities which contribute to the diverse retail offering in Helensburgh.

### Helensburgh Retail Mix



In comparison with other audited towns, the convenience retail sector in Helensburgh comprises a much smaller proportion of all retail activity (11% compared to 21.3% average). Helensburgh has a slightly higher profile in the comparison retail sector (45% compared to average of 41%) and a slightly lower profile in the retail services sector (40% compared to average of 37.6%) when compared to YTA audited town centres. Just under three-quarters (72%) of all retailers in Helensburgh town centre are independent. This equals the average proportion of independent retailers across the YTA audited towns.



## 4. Attractive Town Centre

### 4.1 Overview

In recent years, the public realm in Helensburgh has been the focus of significant redevelopment and regeneration. With just under £7million of investment, the projects of Argyll and Bute Council's CHORD programme focused on two themes in Helensburgh – redevelopment of the West Bay Esplanade and transforming the town centre (traffic management and streetscape improvements).

For the redevelopment of the West Bay Esplanade, a range of public art and informal grass areas along the Waterfront act as points of interest inviting people to investigate and spend time and money at the Waterfront. Both of the themes mutually reinforce one another, for example widening and improving the quality of pavements facilitates the greater footfall as a result of greater points of interest.

Another element was the major reconfiguration of Colquhoun Square. It is clearly designed to strike a balance between both pedestrians and vehicles. It also seeks to be a public space with approximately 50 benches and provides a venue for festivals and events throughout the year.





The redevelopment included the construction of the award-winning Outdoor Museum, a selection of plinths with bronze busts, charting people, objects and events with historical significance to Helensburgh. With empty plinths still available to be filled, this is symbolic of the aims of Colquhoun Square to continually engage with the public as a site of interaction. As stated in the LDP, a key aim of the Colquhoun Square redevelopment was to create further links from the square (and town centre) to the waterfront.



Whilst the development of Helensburgh and Lomond Civic Centre at the site of the former Clyde Street School has brought improvements to the east of the town centre, there is an opportunity for further regeneration. For example, pavements along East Clyde Street could be upgraded to the high standard of the pavements found in the town centre, such as Sinclair Street and West Clyde Street, which were newly-laid in the last three years.

A further example of the greater emphasis of people-led design of town centres is evident in the recent publication of the draft Making Places report for Helensburgh<sup>14</sup>. Making Places is a Scottish-Government scheme which aims to “*engage widely across many community groups and individual voices to evolve a community endorsed Vision for Helensburgh which can inspire any group working in Helensburgh, helping them to gather funding or explore new approaches, to getting a project off the ground and successfully implementing it*”. The Making Places report for Helensburgh will inform policy change, strategic decision making, and Argyll and Bute Council’s forthcoming LDP2<sup>15</sup>.

With a significant contribution from Heritage Lottery, there is also investment in public parks in Helensburgh as Hermitage Park is currently undergoing a £3.1 million refurbishment. The funding will go towards a new children’s playpark, pavilion (with café) and enhancement to horticulture, paths and repairs to the War Memorial and its garden. The works are scheduled to be completed in 2019<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Helensburgh Making Places Report, March 2019, [Accessed online](#)

<sup>15</sup> LDP2 is due for adoption in 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Headland, Hermitage Park Activity Plan (2016 to 2020), [Accessed online](#)

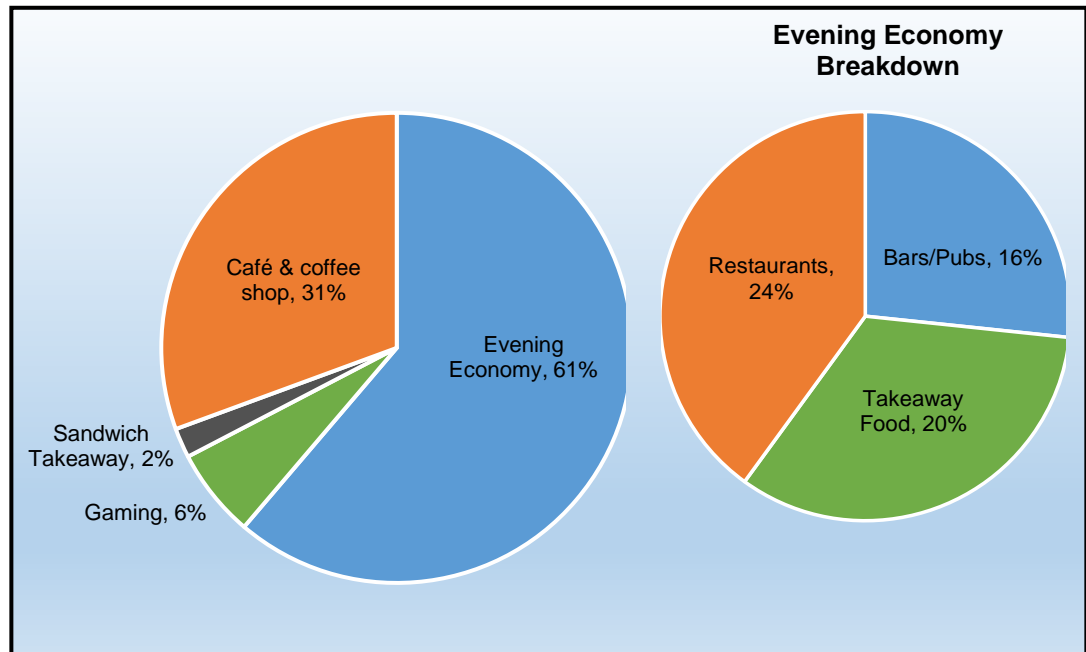
Flower beds and hanging baskets are vibrant and abundant at both Helensburgh Central train station and throughout the town centre. There is plenty of high quality available seating, with approximately 50 benches in Colquhoun Square. Although it should be noted that the three benches on the pier are weathered in appearance and will require an upgrade to meet the standard of seating set in the town centre.



With over 300 voluntary groups including an active community council, Helensburgh has a highly engaged community. The impact of the engagement can be seen in groups such as the Helensburgh Tree Conservation Trust which holds regular tree planting events and has replaced in excess of 2000 trees since forming in 2002. The town's urban trees are now recognised as one of Scotland's National Tree Collections.

## 4.2 Leisure Mix

### Helensburgh Leisure Mix



The leisure offering in the town centre comprises 46 food and drink outlets, eight pubs/ bars and three bookmakers.



There is a good number of high quality eateries in the town centre and these are likely to play a role in attracting visitors to Helensburgh. These outlets cater for various cuisines.

There is a council operated leisure centre, which includes two swimming pools and a gym and health suite, on West Clyde Street at the pier. The exterior of the swimming pool has become weathered and, to an extent, an eyesore for an area of the town centre which should be one of the key attractions in Helensburgh.



Planning permission was granted in January 2019 for the Council's £18 million Helensburgh Waterfront Development. This will result in the demolition of the existing swimming pool and the erection of a new leisure centre and swimming pool at the pier. It will be important to minimise any disruption involved in the construction of the Waterfront development to ensure the impression that Helensburgh remains 'open for business'. Specifically, there should be minimal disruption to parking at the site with coaches maintaining full access and consideration to construction vehicles' impact on the newly-laid surrounding roads.

There are a number of sports clubs in the town. The rugby and cricket club are co-located at the large grounds on Rhu Road Higher in the west of Helensburgh. A golf club is based at Helensburgh Golf Course in the north-east. There are also two active tennis clubs with Helensburgh Tennis Club located in the west end of the town and Craighelen Lawn Tennis & Squash Club in the east.

The proximity to the water adds to the diverse nature of the sporting offer in Helensburgh with active sailing and canoe clubs. Helensburgh Pier is the starting/ end point for the Argyll Sea Kayak Trail which runs to Ganavan Sands, near Oban. Similarly the pier, specifically the John Muir Cabin, is the starting point for the Helensburgh to Balloch route on the John Muir Way. The route takes walkers northwards through the town centre, past Hill House and onward to Balloch. At Hill House, walkers can access the Three Lochs Way, one of Scotland's Great Trails<sup>17</sup>, which is provided and maintained by an active voluntary group, Helensburgh and District Access Trust.

<sup>17</sup> Scotland's Great Trails (2019) Three Lochs Way. [Accessed online](#)

Other sports clubs in the town include bowling, netball, walking and curling. The main hotel in Helensburgh is The Commodore, which operates as a Travelodge and is located on West Clyde Street.

### 4.3 Attractions and Heritage

In addition to its eateries and shops, there are several visitor attractions in Helensburgh. One of the main attractions is The Hill House, designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret MacDonald Mackintosh and built in 1902 on the northern edge of Helensburgh. It is graded four stars by Visit Scotland. The National Trust for Scotland manages The Hill House which has recently reopened following large-scale structural works. The works involved the construction of a £4.5 million protective box which was placed over the house to mitigate water damage affecting the building. A new visitor centre and café was also built with the house reopened to visitors in the first week of June 2019.

Within the town centre, visitor attractions include the Scottish Submarine Centre and the Mackintosh Club. The Scottish Submarine Centre was newly opened in 2018 whilst the Mackintosh Club, a gallery and arts venue, was Charles Rennie Mackintosh's first complete commission designed in 1894.

Helensburgh's community groups and volunteers deliver a range of events for locals and to attract visitors to the area. Regular annual events include Helensburgh Highland Games, Helensburgh Bicentenary Pipe Band Championships, Summer Festival, Bonfire Night, Christmas Lights Switch On, Helensburgh Winter Festival, and Hogmanay Ceilidh. The main site for large events in Helensburgh is Colquhoun Square, the Waterfront and Helensburgh Rugby Club. The people-led redesign of Colquhoun Square allows larger events to be held in the heart of the town centre. The impact of these events can be seen in single events typically attracting 4,000-5,000 visitors who spend and contribute to the local economy.

#### 4.4 Attractiveness Review

The YTA includes an independent (and subjective) review on place and quality impressions, with scores in Helensburgh comparable with other towns which have been audited.

Business confidence in the town centre was gauged from a small sample of interviews undertaken with independent traders. Scores averaged at 7/10, which is above the average across other YTA audited towns of 5.7/10 – by comparison, Giffnock scored 6. It should be noted

that feedback on business confidence was understandably caveated with “*confident but don’t know what is around the corner*”.

Individual unit fronts and shop window displays were graded out of ten during the on-street audit, with a town centre average score of 6.9 for the condition of unit fronts and 6.9 for quality of window display. Both of these scores matched the averages from other towns – buildings 6.9 and windows 6.9.





## 5. YTA Summary and Key Points

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

### 5.1 Accessible Town Centre

- Helensburgh is a commuter town with very good rail, road and bus links to Glasgow and has a high level of digital connectivity.
- The town centre is diverse with a good range of facilities and services, most of which are within walking distance of each other. There have been recent improvements to enhance accessibility and walkability throughout the town centre with the widening of pavements and the management of traffic flow.
- There are 7 off-street car parks located in the town centre providing sufficient parking for the town centre. In addition, on-street parking has been improved with the creation of new parking bays. Provision of car parks which do not charge in the town centre will become increasingly limited with the removal of the lower part of the seafront car park.

### 5.2 Active Town Centre

- With 102 residents per town centre retail outlet, the retail offering is strong, particularly for a town of its size and in comparison to other YTA audited towns.
- The town centre can be split into certain areas:
  - core retail area of Sinclair Street, West Princes Street, and Colquhoun Square
  - food and drink outlets and gift shops along the waterfront on West Clyde Street
  - business and property services area along Colquhoun Street
  - East Clyde Street and surrounding area

Overall most of these town centre sub-areas are strong in terms of identity and offering with a low vacancy rate and no clusters of vacant units.

The only slight exception is the ongoing scaffolding works on East Clyde Street, situated on one of the main roads into the town, which may adversely influence initial impression of Helensburgh.

- There may be an opportunity to explore broadening the mix of housing in the town centre, particularly creating social housing or affordable units, to attract residents to Helensburgh and to address the decreasing population within the town.

### 5.3 Attractive Town Centre

- In recent years, the public realm in Helensburgh has been the focus of significant redevelopment and regeneration with the redevelopment of West Bay Esplanade, Colquhoun Square and Helensburgh and Lomond Civic Centre. Further development is scheduled at the pier with the approval of the £18 million Waterfront Development which includes a new leisure centre and swimming pool. There is an opportunity for further redevelopment with the upgrade of pavements along East Clyde Street and benches at the pier to meet the high standard of pavements and benches throughout the rest of the town centre.
- The vibrant and abundant flower displays and busy calendar of events are testament to the strong and active voluntary sector in Helensburgh. There is a considerable range of high-quality public art and attractions in Helensburgh which have been included as part of the regeneration projects in Helensburgh, e.g. the Outdoor Museum in Colquhoun Square.