

Wem: Town Centre Audit Analysis, 2023



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Introduction

An audit of businesses operating in Wem's main shopping streets was undertaken in September 2023 as part of an on-going piece of research reviewing the vibrancy of Shropshire's main market towns and key settlements. Wem centre was first audited in July 2019, and then again in September 2020, 2021 and 2022. The objective of these audits is to provide a snapshot of the vitality of the town by investigating:

- The range and diversity of the retail offer
- The number and types of non-retail businesses operating
- The number and location of vacant properties
- Distinctive characteristics within the town, for example a strong tourism offer or a high penetration of "low end" traders
- The amount, location and type of domestic residences in the centre of the town

The research also aims to monitor change over time. The functionality of the High Street has been changing for some time, and through 2020 and 2021 the coronavirus pandemic posed additional challenges to High Street businesses. The 2020 audits for all towns took place in September, following the first national lockdown. Non-essential retail and hospitality businesses were able to trade at this time (albeit with strict social distancing measures in place). The 2021 audits also took place when High Street businesses were able to trade. By 2022 High Streets were trading normally with no Covid-19 restrictions, but the cost of living crisis was gathering pace. Inflation was elevated in 2023, which has also impacted people's spending power.

Key Findings

- 99 commercial units, occupying 10,800m² gross floor space
- 8th largest centre in Shropshire accommodating 3.8% of all Shropshire High Street traders
- Average number of stores per head of population at a rate of 16 units per 1,000 population
- Average store size 109m² which is notably smaller than the average across Shropshire (147m²)
- 182 residential premises in the main shopping area, giving a ratio of 0.6:1 commercial versus residential properties
- Wem had a 14% business churn rate between the 2022 and 2023 audits, which was slightly higher than the Shropshire average (12%). Since 2019, overall churn stands at 50%, which is on a par with the average for Shropshire
- 16% of all commercial premises were vacant in 2023, which is the highest amongst all Shropshire towns (average 11%) and is also higher than the national average. The number of vacancies has however fallen by four since 2020
- The highest proportion of commercial units is attributable to retail services (26%)
- In contrast, there are comparatively few businesses operating in comparison retail (18%)
- The largest store in the town is the Co-op, meaning that convenience retail accounts for a disproportionately high share of floor space.

Methodology Statement

Only the main retail centre of the town was surveyed, as shown on Map 4.

Both retail and non-retail businesses will be operating in other parts of the town. In Wem, the business park is just outside the scope of this audit.

All commercial premises within the defined area were audited, and classified as:

- Comparison Retail—defined as stores selling non-food/drink/tobacco products
- Convenience Retail—defined as stores selling food/drink/tobacco products
- Retail Service— defined as stores selling a service rather than a product, such as hair dressers or travel agents
- Financial & Business Services — for example, banks, solicitors, accountants, estate agents
- Health - including dentists, health centres, GP practices, alternative therapies
- Restaurants & Takeaways—including cafés and tea rooms
- Tourism & Leisure—hotels and public houses/bars as well as visitor attractions and cultural assets
- Education & Community Facilities—including schools, colleges, libraries, community centres
- Other Non-Retail
- Vacant

Gross floor space was matched to each premise using OS Master Map. It should be noted, that where two outlets shared the same premise (as shown on Master Map) an assumption was made that both occupied the same amount of floor space. For multi-storey buildings occupied by multiple businesses, it is assumed that all floors have the same gross space. Unless it is clear that a single business occupies more than one floor of a building, it has been assumed that it occupies only one floor. This means that in some cases, gross floor space may be under-estimated as some traders use upper floors for storage. No estimate relating to net floor space has been made.

Businesses occupying above ground floor level premises have only been included in this audit if their presence is clear from street level (by door signs or external hoardings for example). It is likely, therefore, that some non-consumer businesses operating in the area may have been missed.

Premises are assumed to have changed hands if their name or function has changed since the 2022 audit. In some cases though, ownership may be unchanged but the business has been rebranded or renamed.

An estimate of the number of domestic residences in the main retail centre has been made using OS Address Base (complete version) using all residential classification codes.

Retail Centre Hierarchy

Town centres represent important employment, entertainment and shopping hubs for their local population and hinterland. They also represent an important component of the visitor economy.

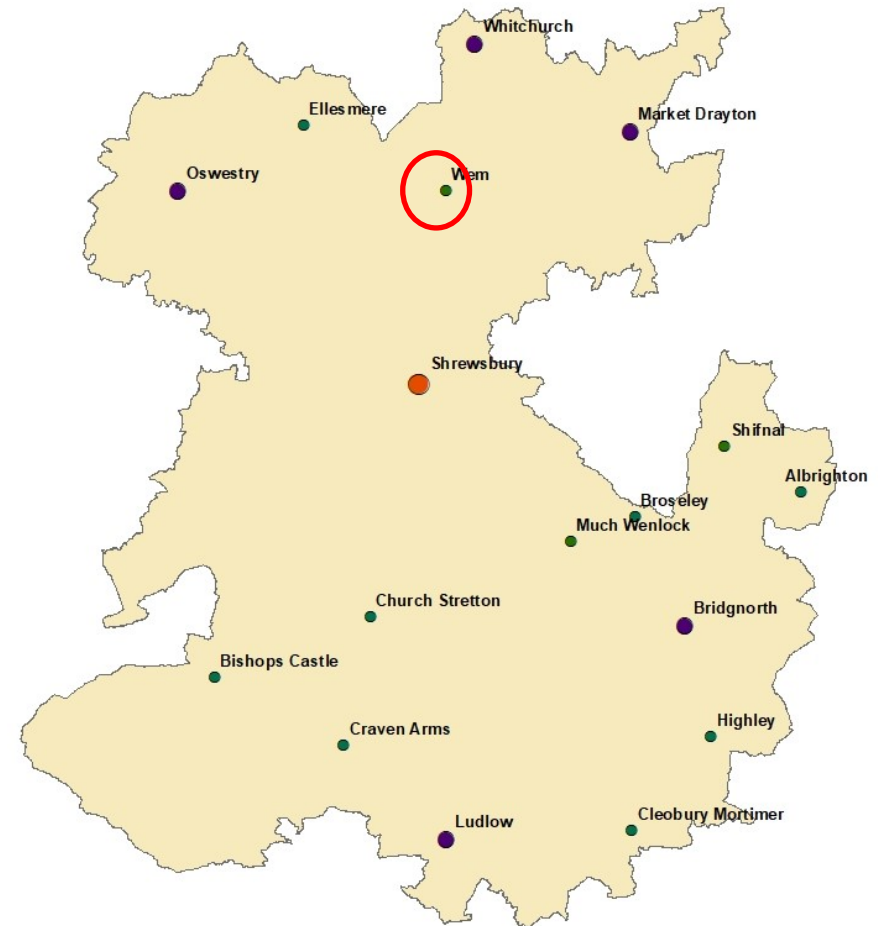
However, not all centres have comparable functions. Larger centres tend to attract workers and shoppers from much further afield than smaller centres, and consequently offer a much greater volume and variety of retail trade and consumer and business services.

In order to benchmark Shropshire towns against each other in an appropriate manner, the following hierarchy has been adopted:

- Tier 1: Shrewsbury
- Tier 2: Bridgnorth
Ludlow
Oswestry
Market Drayton
Whitchurch
- Tier 3: Albrighton
Bishops Castle
Broseley
Church Stretton
Cleobury Mortimer
Craven Arms
Ellesmere
Highley
Much Wenlock
Shifnal
Wem

Along with Shifnal and Ellesmere, Wem supports a relatively large retail centre compared with other tier 3 Shropshire towns.

Map 1: Shropshire's Main Retail Centres



About Wem

Wem is a small market town located in the centre of Shropshire to the north of the county town, Shrewsbury. The area was first settled during the Celtic Iron Age, and today has a population of 6,282 and 2,827 households (*2021 Census*). The town's population has grown by 7.0% since 2011. It is the eighth largest market town in the county.

The town has Whitchurch to the north, Market Drayton to the east, Shrewsbury to the south and Oswestry to the west. Wem is located west of the A49 which provides access south to Shrewsbury (13 miles) and north to Whitchurch (10 miles). Local roads also provide access to surrounding market towns, including Ellesmere, and the countryside. Wem is also on the national rail network on the Manchester to Shrewsbury line. The total population within a 10 mile radius is approximately 97,300.

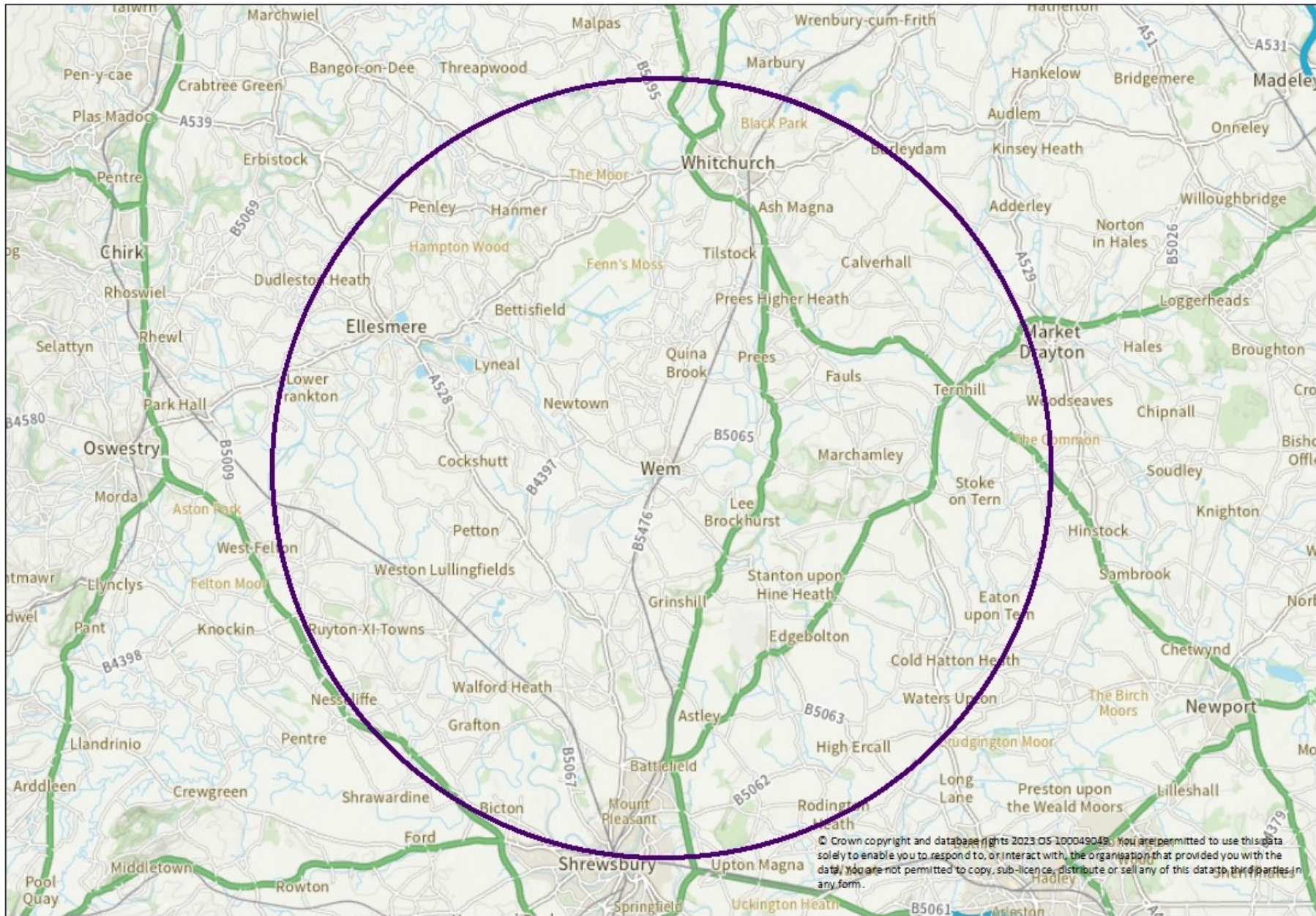
Wem provides approximately 1,500 jobs across the town council area (*ONS Business Register and Employment Survey, 2022*). Key sectors include:

- Health (22.0% of jobs)
- Education (15.3% of jobs)
- Retail (9.5% of jobs)
- Accommodation & Food Services (8.1% of jobs)

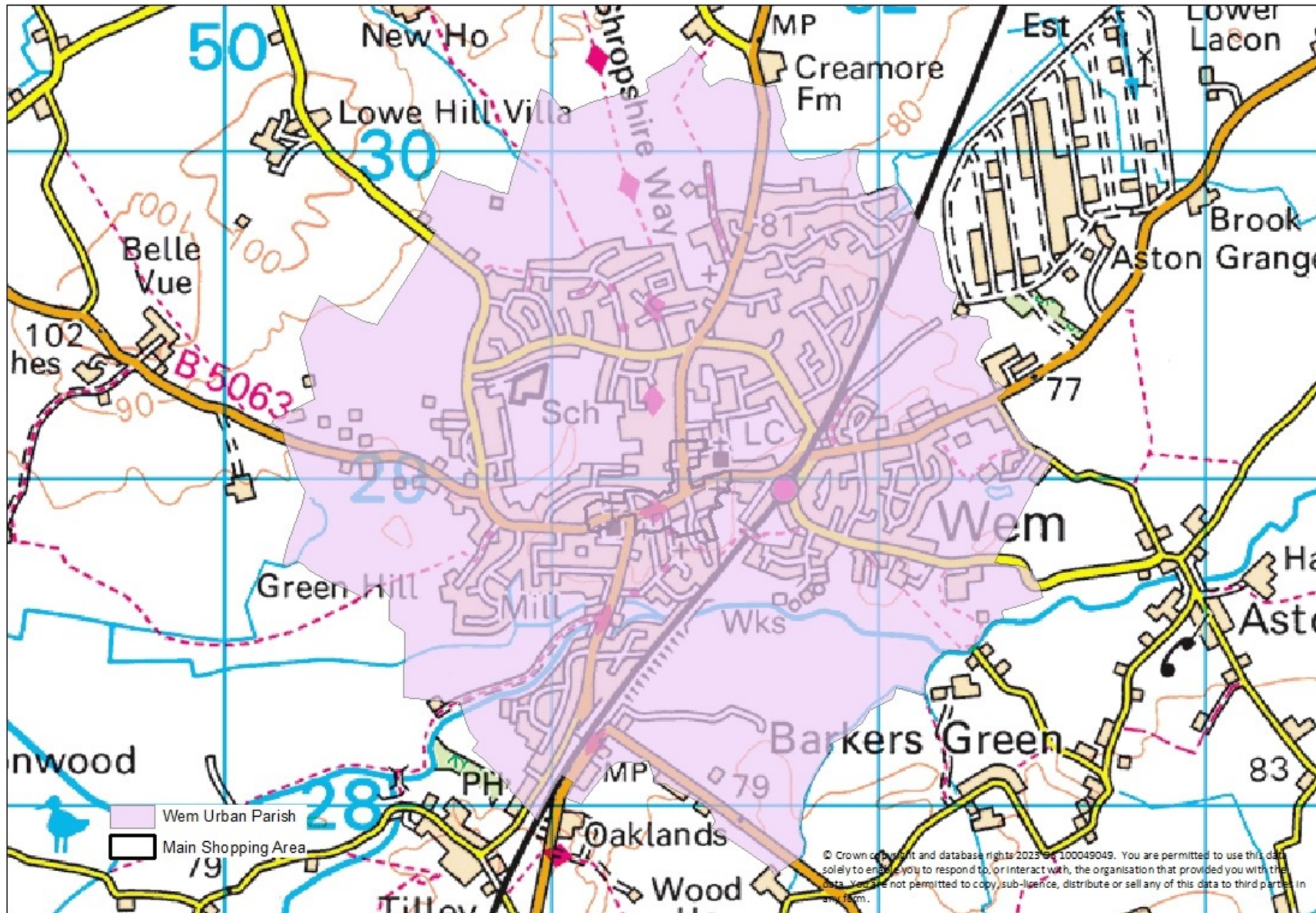
Overall, Wem town council area (depicted on Map 3) covers an area of 367 hectares. The main shopping area (depicted on Map 4) is much smaller than this, at around 6 hectares.

The town comprises predominantly independent retail and there is a significant amount of residential housing stock in the main shopping area of the town. The weekly market is held at the town hall and square every Thursday.

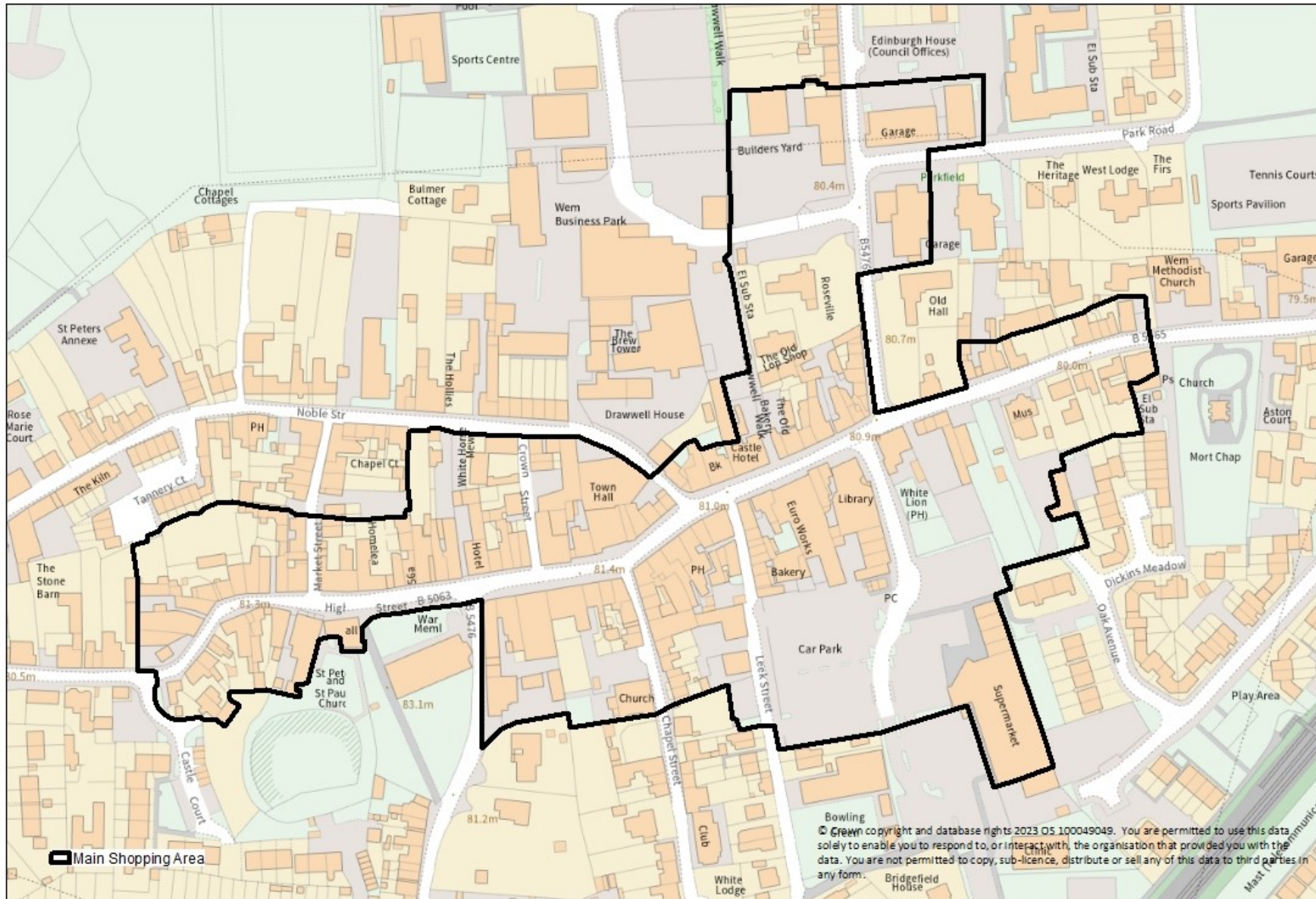
Map 2: Location of Wem showing 10 mile radius



Map 3: Wem Town Council Area



Map 4: Main Retail Shopping Area



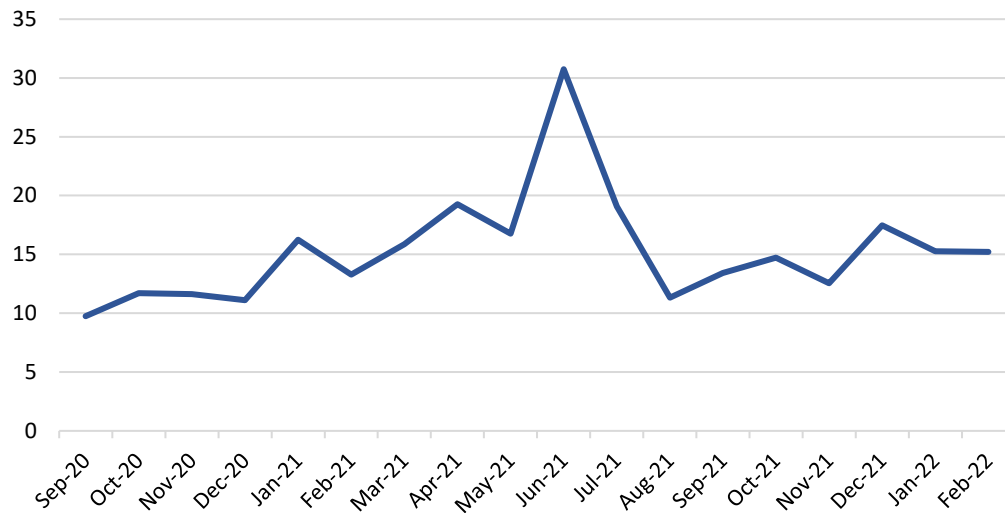
Catchment and Footfall

The map on the following page shows the main catchment for Wem town centre. It covers the town itself and a significant hinterland that stretches to Whitchurch, Market Drayton and Ellesmere to the north and to Shrewsbury to the south. Overall, the area includes six postcode districts.

The total population within the catchment is 121,875 people which is slightly larger than the Market Drayton catchment population and slightly smaller than for Whitchurch. The average catchment distance is shorter than for any other Shropshire town at 6.58 miles.

The chart below shows the percentage of the catchment population visiting Wem at least once a month since September 2020. The conversion rate has ranged between 9.7% (September 2020) and 30.7% (June 2021).

Chart 1: Catchment Conversion (%)



Source: Town & Place AI

Note: Catchment defined as any postcode district from which at least 3% of residents visited the town on at least one occasion during the preceding month. Hence, the precise catchment area and catchment population will change on a monthly basis.

The map on the following page shows the percentage of each postcode that forms part of the Wem catchment area that visited the town centre at least once in February 2022.

The overall catchment conversion stood at 15.2% in February 2022. However, this ranges from more than 36.2% in SY4 (where Wem is located) to 5% or less in SY2 and TF9.

Overall, 72% of visitors to Wem originated from the two postcode districts that make up the core catchment (SY4 and SY13). This proportion is relatively high. The remainder of the catchment accounts for 24% of visitors, with the remaining 4% representing visitors from further afield (classified as tourists). The proportion of visitors accounted for by tourists is relatively low.

Chart 3: Trends in Wem Postcode Conversion

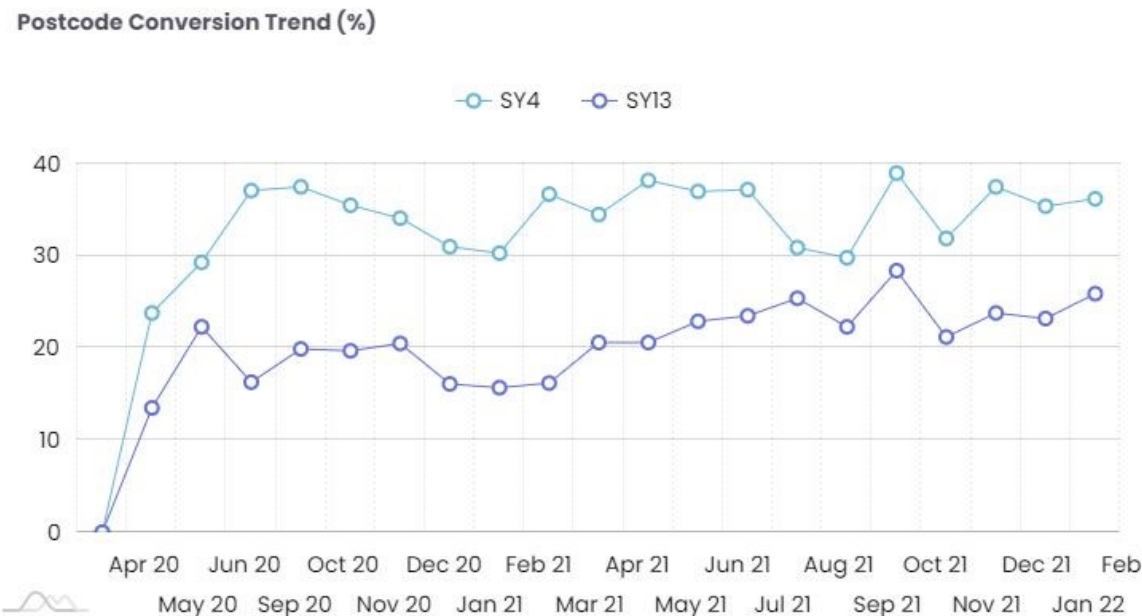
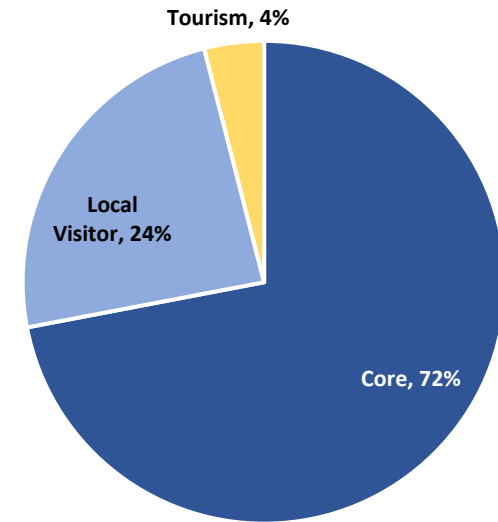
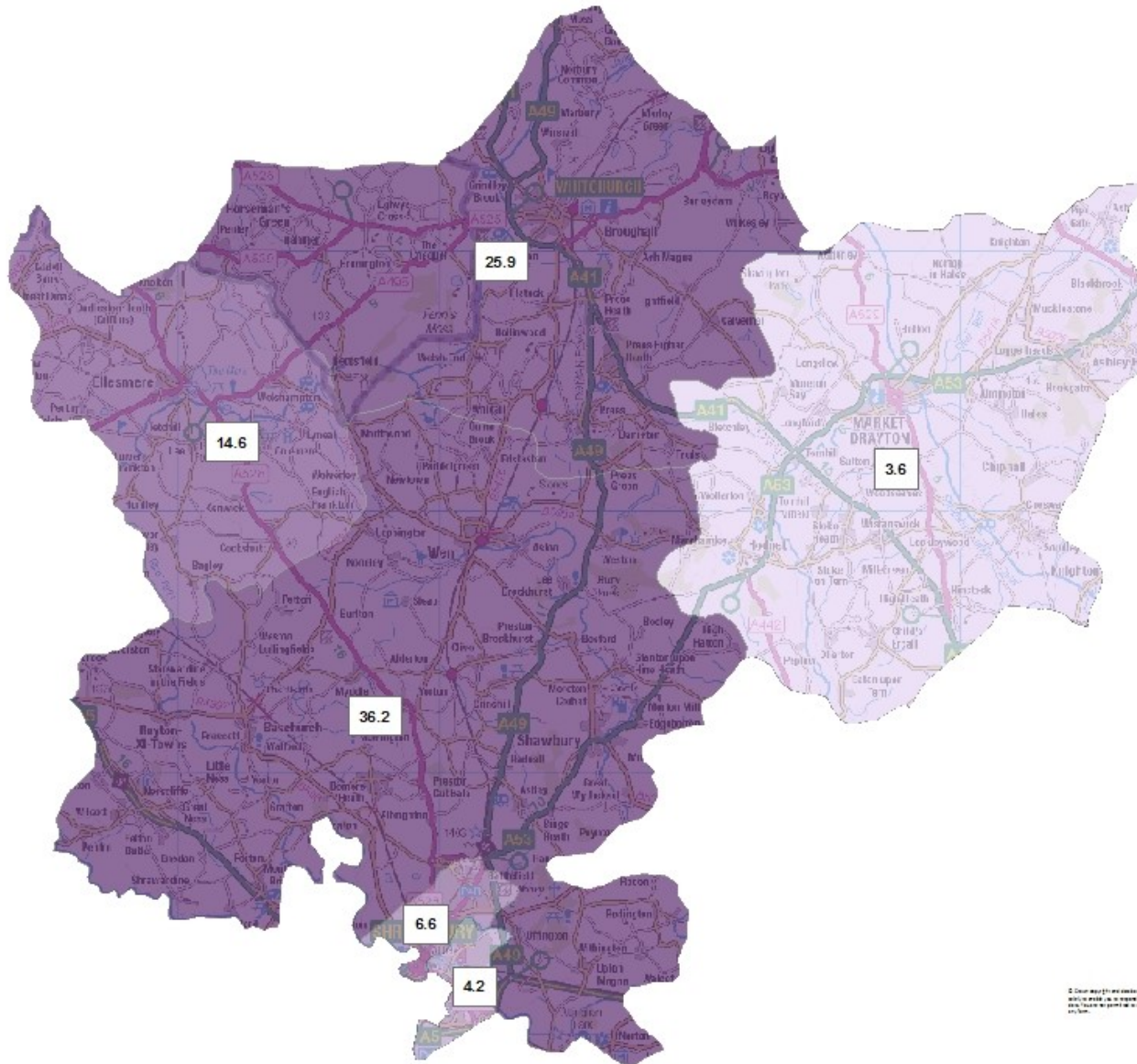


Chart 2: Breakdown of Visitors to Wem, February 2022



The adjacent chart shows trends in postcode conversion for the Wem core catchment area. It shows that conversion from the core postcode districts SY4 and SY13 have followed a similar pattern over the last several months, with the rate of conversion consistently higher for SY4 than for SY13.

Wem: Postcode Conversion
February 2022

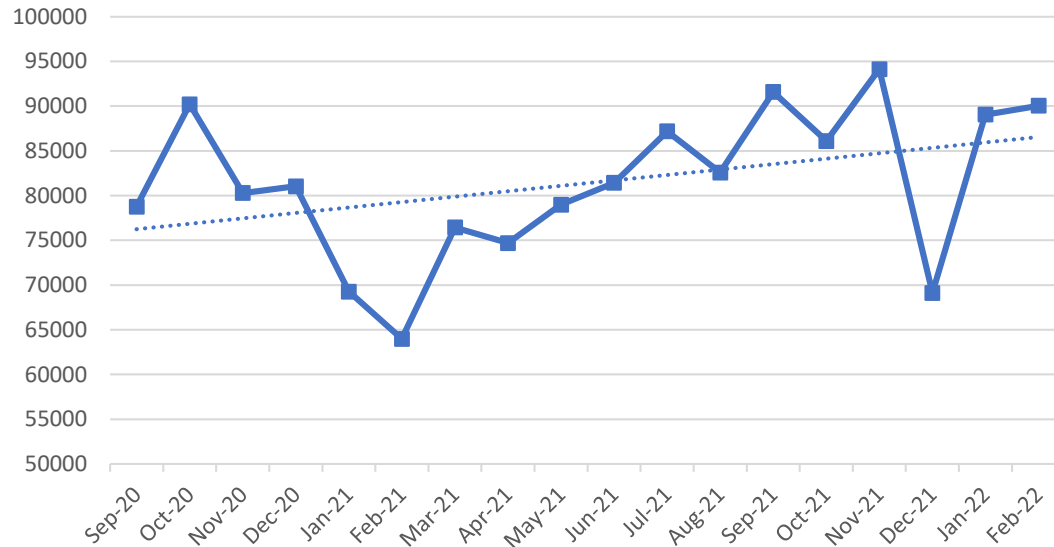


Source: Town & Place AI

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The following chart shows footfall in Wem town centre from September 2020 to February 2022. Overall, the trend is upward, but there have been some large dips—at the beginning of 2021 when the country entered its third lockdown and again in December 2021, when larger shopping destinations may have benefitted from Christmas trade. Overall footfall stood at 90,033 in February 2022, which represents an increase of 41% over the same month in 2021.

Chart 4: Trends in Footfall



Wem attracted 33,720 unique visitors in February 2022, each of whom visited an average of 2.67 times to generate footfall of just over 90,000. The average dwell time was 32 minutes.

Alternative Shopping Destinations

Only around a third of Wem residents (SY4) visited the town centre in February 2022, suggesting that the majority of the town's population utilises alternative shopping destinations. The most frequently visited alternative destination is Shrewsbury, with 56.2% of SY4 residents visiting at least once in the month. Shrewsbury is just over 10 miles from Wem (see Map 2). The proportion visiting Shrewsbury has risen gradually over the period since April 2020 in line with the easing of Covid-19 restrictions. Wem residents were less likely to visit Ellesmere or Whitchurch than Shrewsbury, with these towns attracting 11.7% and 8.6% of Wem residents respectively in February 2022.

Chart 5: Shrewsbury

Postcode Conversion Trend (%)



Chart 6: Ellesmere

Postcode Conversion Trend (%)



Chart 7: Whitchurch

Postcode Conversion Trend (%)

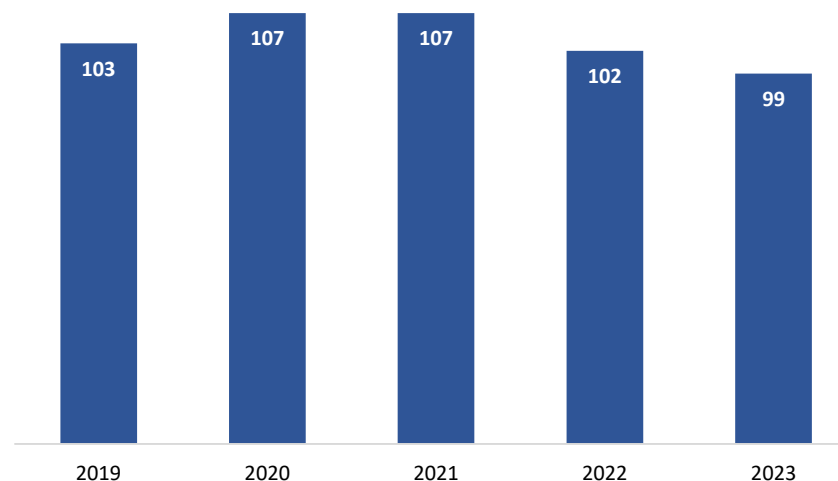


Postcode conversion charts have been downloaded from the Town and Place AI tool which monitors visitor numbers and footfall across a range of towns and city centres across the UK.

Key Audit Results

There are a total of 99 commercial premises within the Wem survey area. These are primarily in High Street (75 business premises), with a small number in Aston Street (10), Leek Street (6), Mill Street (1) and New Street (7). Gross floor space allocated to these premises is approximately 10,800m² (more than 80% in High Street). The average store size is 109m² with units ranging in size from 10m² to 1,586m². Over the last year, the number of commercial units has reduced by three, with two units on the High Street no longer classed as commercial, and another two units in Maypole Court combining into one larger space. Since 2021, the number of commercial units in Wem's main shopping area has reduced by eight.

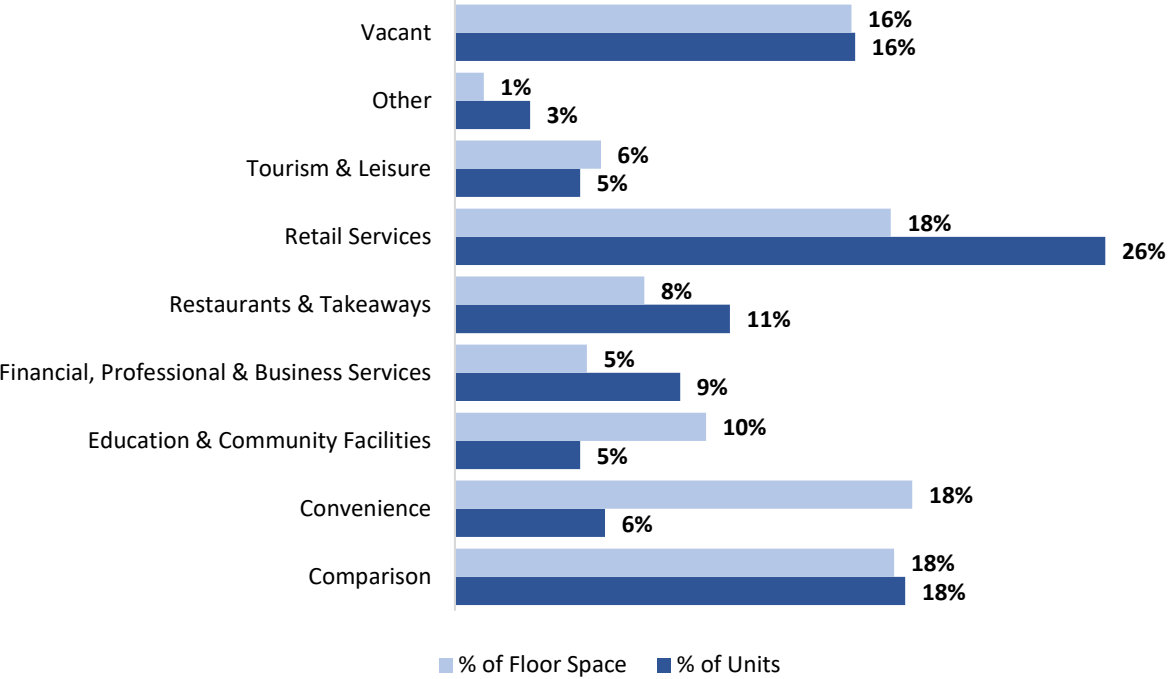
Chart 8: Number of Commercial Premises in Wem, 2019-2023



The highest proportion of commercial units is allocated to retail services, at 26% of the total. These are comparatively small in size and account for a smaller share of floor space (18%). In unit terms, comparison retail accounts for the second largest share at 18% of the total (18% of floor space). Convenience retail accounts for only a small share of units (6%) but for a significant proportion of floor space (18%). 11% of units are attributable to restaurants and takeaways, while 9% of units are filled by a financial/business services operator. Small numbers of units are filled by educational/community facilities, tourism & leisure operators and non-service and other types of businesses.

There are 16 vacant premises in Wem (16% of units), which is the equivalent of 16% of floor space.

Chart 9: Breakdown of Wem Commercial Premises by Classification, 2023



Change since 2022

The overall number of premises in Wem reduced by three units in 2023, with two units no longer classified as commercial and two others amalgamating into one larger unit. There has, however, been minimal change in the commercial mix. The number of businesses classified as retail service providers rose by one, and there is also one more convenience store. Meanwhile, there are two fewer in the restaurant/takeaway sector, and one fewer in tourism and leisure and in comparison retail. The number of vacant units in the town rose by one in 2023 compared with the previous year.

Chart 10: Breakdown of Business Churn 2019-2023

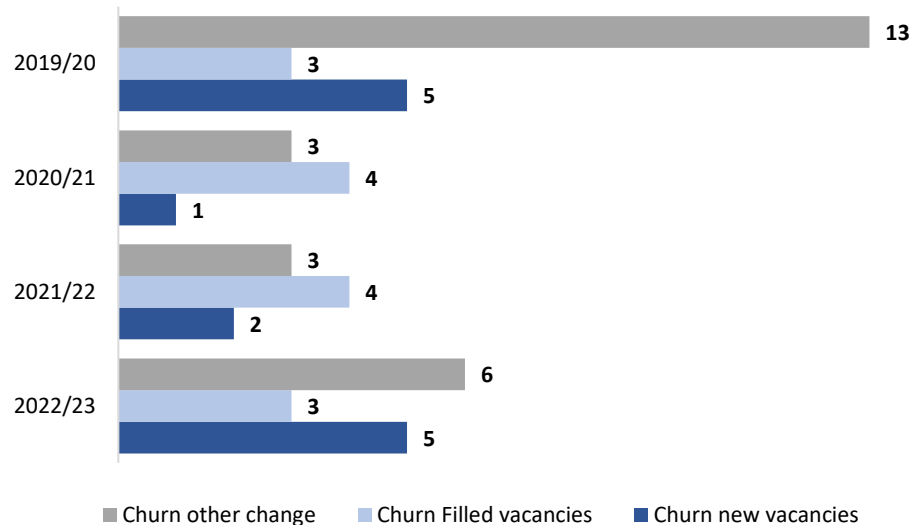
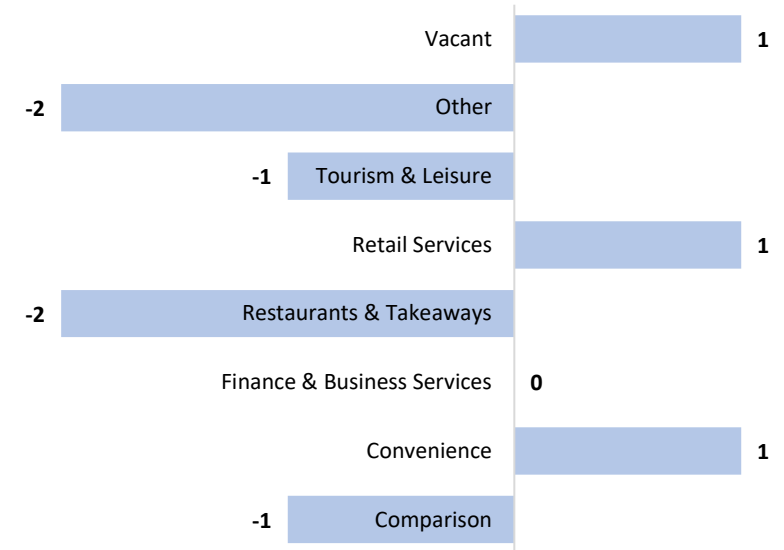


Chart 9: Change in Number of Units by Category, 2022/2023



The level of churn in Wem town centre—premises changing hands or use—was very high in 2020 (20%) but was much reduced in 2021, with just 8 stores changing hands or purpose (7% churn rate). This number was similar in 2022 at nine units (9% churn). In 2023, 14 units changed hands or purpose, which is a 14% churn rate.

In 2023, premises becoming vacant accounted for more than a third of all churn, compared with previously vacant premises becoming occupied which represented 21% of churn. This compares unfavourably with 2022, when filled vacancies represented twice the level of churn as new vacancies.

Comparison Retail

The second largest proportion of commercial units is attributable to comparison retail (18%). This classification accounts for a similar proportion of floor space (18%). This equates with 18 stores with over 1,900m² of floor space. There has been some fluctuation in the number of comparison retailers trading since 2019, but the overall trend is downward.

Although they account for a substantial portion of all commercial activity, comparison retail is under-represented in Wem, accounting for a lower proportion of units than any where else except Highley, Craven Arms, Cleobury Mortimer, Broseley and Shifnal.

Chart 11: Number of Comparison Retail Stores, 2019-2023

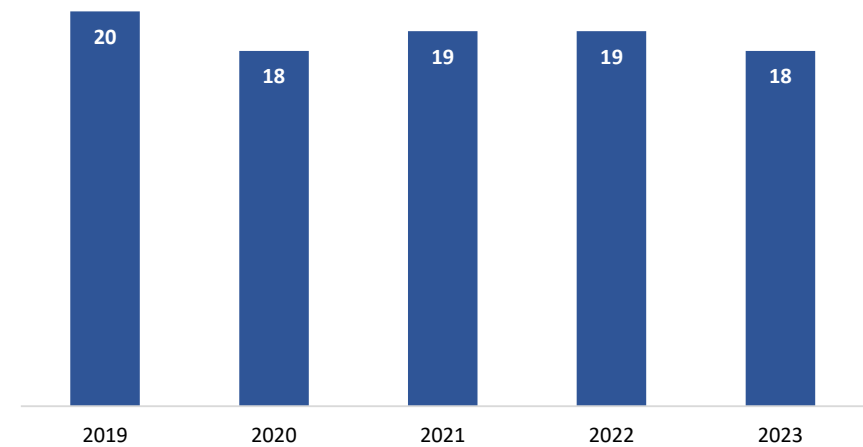
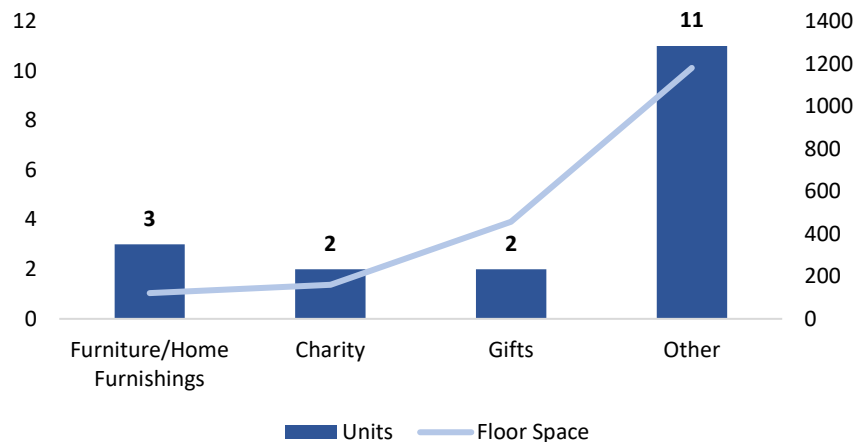


Chart 12: Breakdown of Comparison Retail by Type, 2023



Within the town there are two gift shops, two charity shops and three home goods stores (one selling furniture, another carpets and the third curtains). All other classification types are represented by just one store. These include a florist, a computer shop, a DIY store, an electronics store, a jewellery shop, an antiques shop, a book shop and a pharmacy.

There are now no clothes shops in Wem, with the one trader closing in 2023. This was replaced by the antiques shop. The other change in the comparison sector in 2023 was the closure of one of the town's book shops.

The majority of stores are independent, although the town is home to Rowlands pharmacy and Severn Hospice charity shop (a local charity, but nonetheless a small chain of stores).

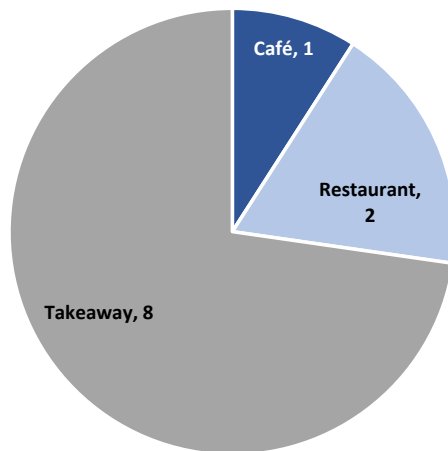
Convenience Retail

There are six convenience stores within the main shopping area of Wem, which is one more outlet compared with 2022. Convenience accounts for 6% of all units and for 18% of gross floor space. As well as a supermarket (the Co-op), there is a delicatessen, a butcher, a confectionery store and an outlet offering a food subscription service. A new general store opened in 2023 in a previously vacant premise. The town's bakery store closed between the 2021 and 2022 audits.

Other than the Co-op, which is the largest store in Wem and contributes to the category's high floor space share, other operators in the convenience retail sector are independent.

Restaurants & Takeaways

Chart 13: Breakdown of Units in the Restaurant/Takeaway Sector, 2023



11% of units in Wem are attributable to restaurants and takeaways, with this category accounting for a notably lower proportion of gross floor space (8%). There has been a decline of two units trading since 2022, with one café and one restaurant closing.

The 11 units are split between cafés (9%), restaurants (18%) and takeaways (73%). There is now just one café in Wem—this changed hands between the 2022 and 2023 audits. One of the Wem restaurants is Indian, and the other Italian. In terms of takeaways, there is fish and chips, Chinese, Indian and pizza. Takeaways account for a proportionally lower share of floor space (53%) compared with restaurants (34%) and cafés (13%). The number of takeaways in Wem is high compared to the number of restaurants or cafés and there has been no change in the offer over the last year.

There are no chain stores in the restaurant and takeaway category in Wem.

Tourism & Leisure

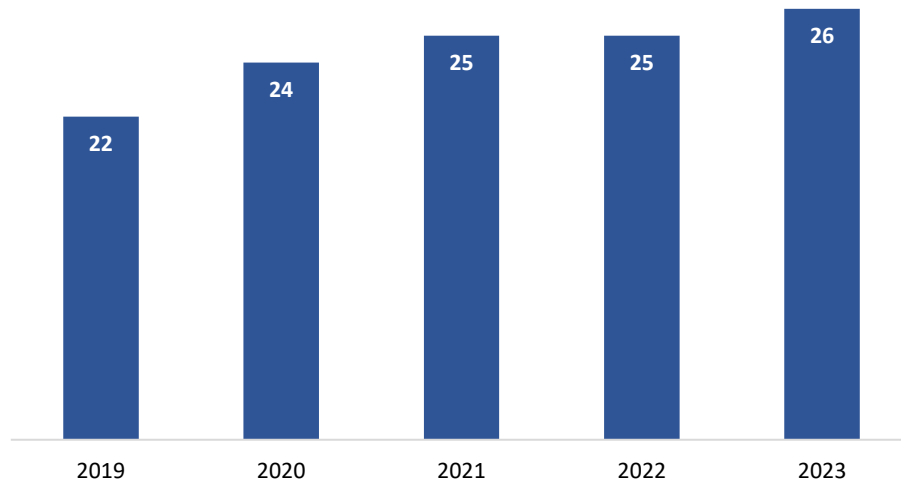
Also within the hospitality sector, there are three public houses. These take up approximately 450m² gross floor space. One public house closed in 2023, but this closure was offset by a new operator on the High Street. There is self-catering holiday accommodation located within the town as well as a theatre. The town's dance school has closed over the last year.

Finance & Business Services

There are nine commercial operators in the finance, professional and business services sector in Wem town centre, accounting for around 600m² of gross floor space. Included within this classification are three estate agents, three consultants, a solicitor and a sound engineer. There are no longer any banks or building societies open in Wem.

Retail Services

Chart 14: Number of Retail Service Providers, 2019-2023

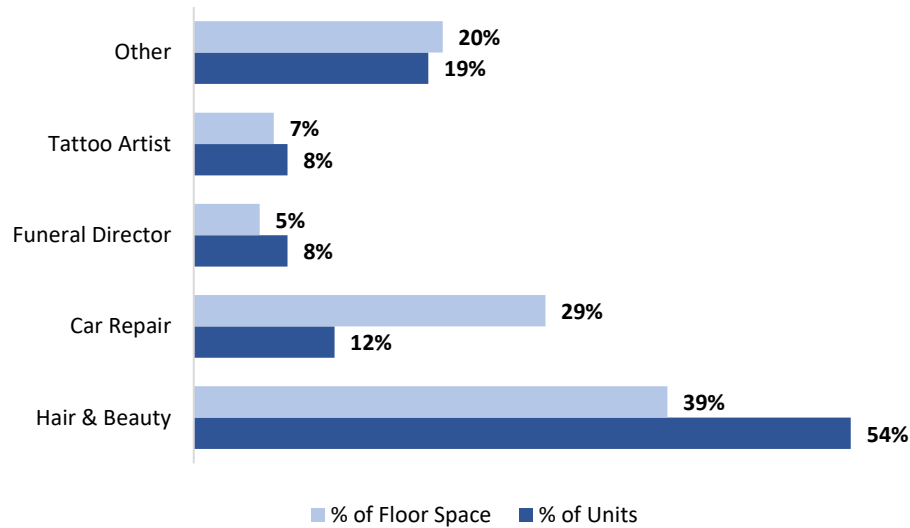


There are 26 retail service businesses operating in Wem town centre, with these accounting for more than 1,900m² of gross floor space. The number trading has risen by four since 2019 (+18%).

Compared with many other towns, retail services make up a high proportion of the commercial offer in Wem, especially in unit terms. They represent 26% of all traders, which compares with an average of 19% for Shropshire. The average size of stores is small, so this classification represents a much smaller share of floor space (18%).

Although the range of services provided is wide, a very high number of operators are in the barber and hair salon classification, with these together representing 54% of units and 39% of floor space. In addition, there are three garages (one offering a valet service), two funeral directors and two tattoo artists. Amongst other services provided in the town (by one operator only) are dry cleaners, launderette, optician and a post office.

Chart 15: Breakdown of Retail Services by Type, 2023



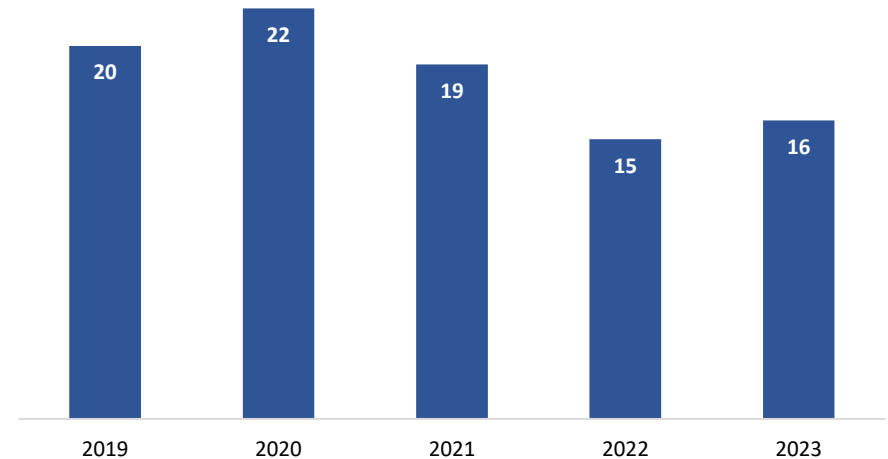
Vacant Units

16% of Wem town centre outlets are vacant (16% of gross floor space). This is the highest vacancy rate of all Shropshire towns and is also higher than the vacancy rate nationally which stood at 13.9% in the second quarter of 2023 according to BRC (based on high street data only). Wem and Cleobury Mortimer are the only towns in Shropshire where the vacancy rate was higher than the national average at the time of the 2023 audit. The high vacancy rate on the High Street has been exacerbated by the significant number of businesses that have relocated to the Business Park, which is just outside the scope of this audit.

The number of vacancies in the main shopping area of Wem has declined since 2020, falling from 22 units.

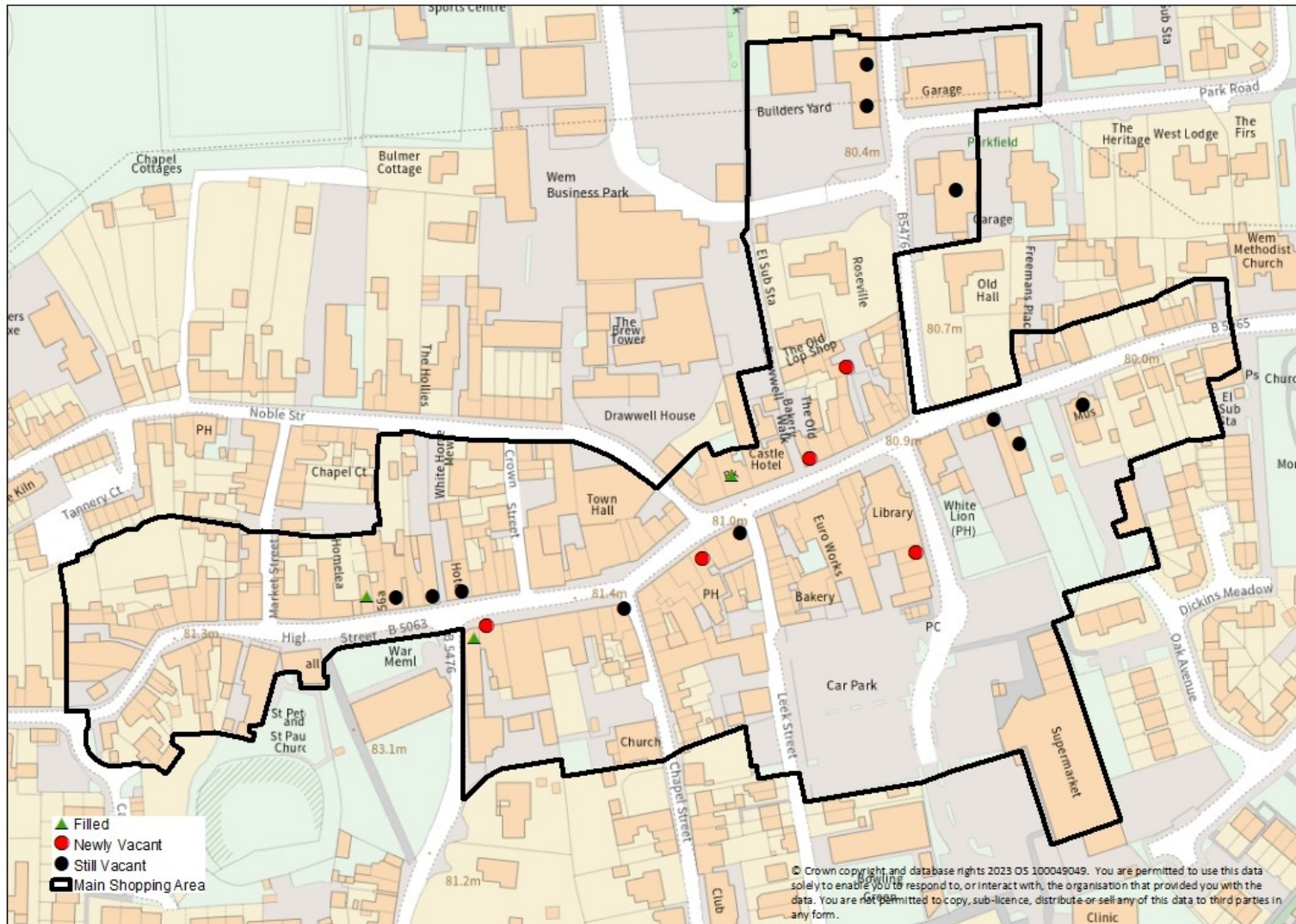
In 2023, almost a third of vacancies were new since 2022. Half have been vacant since 2020, and there are six units that have been empty since at least 2019.

Chart 16: Number of Vacant Units, 2019-2023



Wem has traditionally had the highest vacancy rate of all Shropshire towns, but despite this the number has fallen by six since 2020. In 2023, five new vacancies arose, while three previously vacant premises were filled. Of the 15 units which were vacant in 2022, 11 are still unoccupied and one is no longer classed as commercial.

Map 8: Change in the Number & Location of Commercial Units, 2021-22



Residential Premises

There is a significant amount of residential property within the main shopping centre in Wem. In total, 182 residential premises are located in the audit area, of which the majority are flats (111 or 61%) which are largely located above retail or other commercial outlets. Much of this stock is along the High Street. There are small quantities of detached and semi-detached housing stock, most of which is towards the periphery of the main shopping area. There are 49 terraced houses in Wem town centre (just over a quarter of the total), with significant clusters around the west end of the High Street and along Aston Street. The number of residential premises within this area of Wem has reduced by two since 2019.

Map 9: Location of Residential Premises in Wem Town Centre

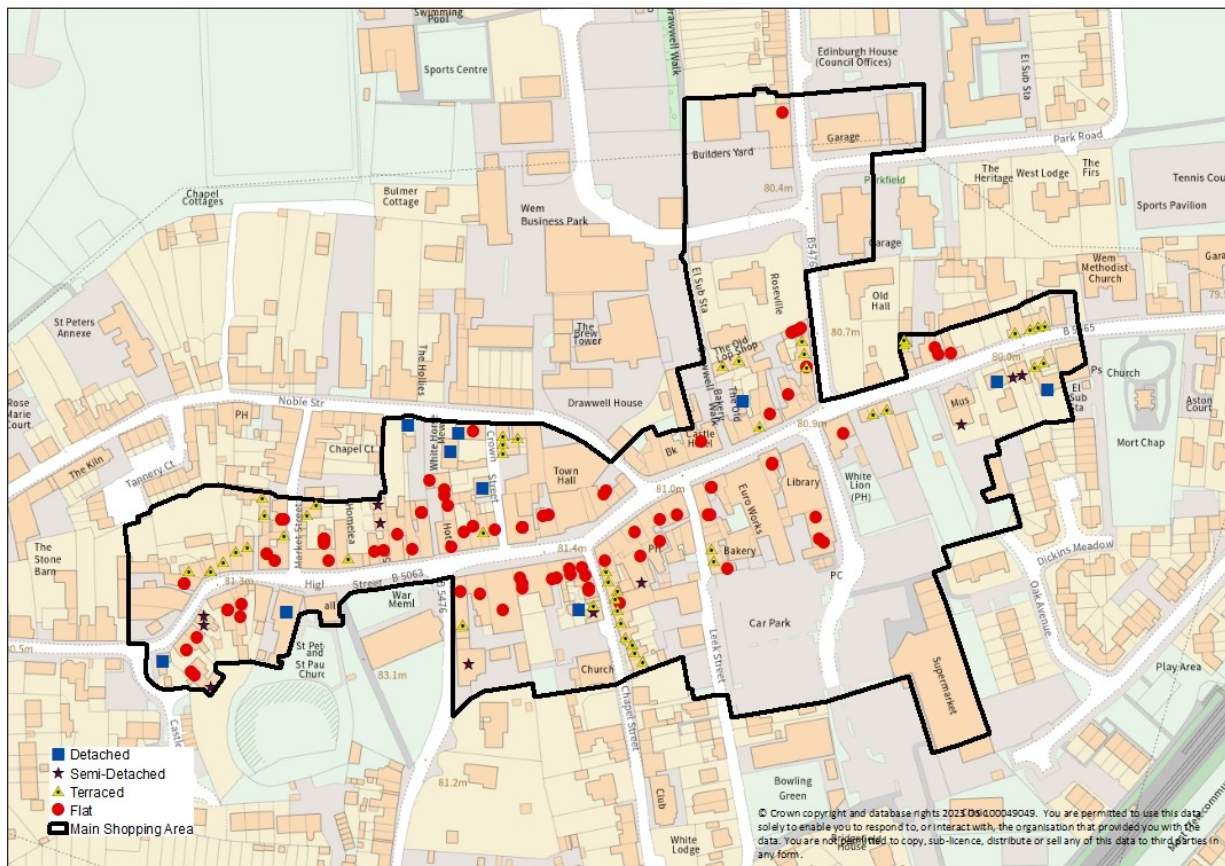


Chart 17: Breakdown of Residential Properties by Type

