

Whitchurch: Town Centre Audit Analysis, 2024



Shropshire
Council

Published December 2024

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Introduction

An audit of businesses operating in Whitchurch's main shopping streets was undertaken in September 2024 as part of a longitudinal research study reviewing the vibrancy of Shropshire's main market towns and key settlements. Whitchurch centre was first audited in July 2019 and then again in September every year between 2020 and 2024. 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
- The level of business churn—how many businesses are closing and opening each year
- 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, with internet shopping a key factor that has impacted. In October 2024, 27.6% of all retail sales were attributable to on-line purchases. Through 2020 and into 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. By 2024, inflation was much reduced, but economic confidence remained low.

Key Findings

- 126 commercial units, occupying 15,500m² gross floor space
- 6th largest centre in Shropshire accommodating 5.0% of all Shropshire High Street traders—smallest of the tier 2 towns (marginally smaller than Market Drayton).
- Relatively low number of stores per head of population at a rate of 11.9 units per 1,000 population and 1,468m² per 1,000 population compared with 13 units and 1,913m² for Shropshire.
- Average store size 123m² which is lower than the average across Shropshire (147m²) and the eighth largest across the Shropshire towns.
- 148 residential premises in the main shopping area, giving a ratio of 0.9:1 commercial versus residential properties.
- Whitchurch had an 18% business churn rate between the 2023 and 2024 audits. This compares with churn of 17% in the previous year. In the previous two years, churn was much lower at 11%. Accumulated churn in the town since 2019 has been amongst the highest in Shropshire.
- 10% of all commercial premises were vacant in 2024, which is lower than the Shropshire average (11% in 2024).
- The number of vacancies has been in decline since 2020 although there was a slight increase in 2024.
- The highest proportion of commercial units is attributable to comparison retail (33%). Only Ludlow and Church Stretton support a higher proportion of comparison retail.
- Retail services are also slightly over-represented , accounting for 21% of commercial units (19% for Shropshire).
- Restaurants and takeaways have an average representation (accounting for 15% of units compared with 14% for Shropshire).
- In contrast, there are comparatively few businesses operating in finance/business services at just 6% (9% for Shropshire), which is lower than anywhere else except Highley and Albrighton.

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 Whitchurch a main employment hub, Whitchurch Business Park, is 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 2023 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.

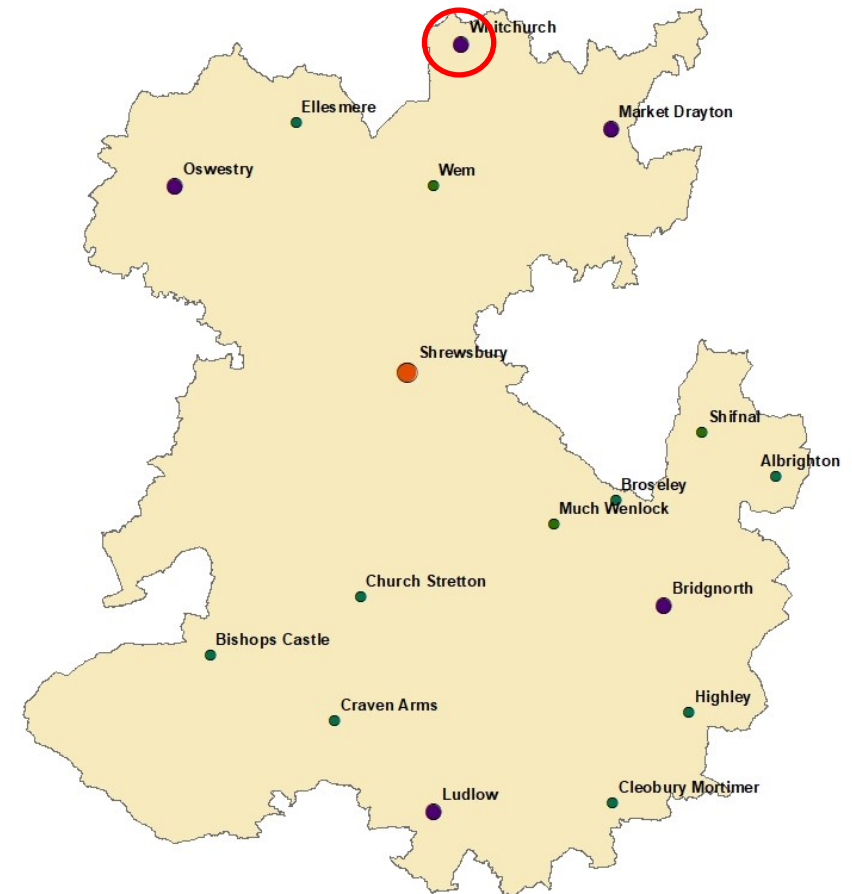
However, not all centres have comparable functions. Larger centres tend to attract workers and shoppers from much further afield than smaller centres, and consequently offer a much greater volume and variety of retail trade and consumer and business services.

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

Whitchurch is a similar size to Market Drayton—notably larger than most of the tier 3 centres, but smaller than Bridgnorth, Ludlow and Oswestry.

Map 1: Shropshire's Main Retail Centres



About Whitchurch

Whitchurch is located in the north of Shropshire. It has been inhabited since Roman times, and today has a population of 10,142 and 4,573 households (2021 Census). The town's population has grown by 2.7% since 2011. Whitchurch has recently overtaken Ludlow as the fifth largest market town in the county in terms of the size of its resident population.

The town has Cheshire to the north, Stoke to the east, Shrewsbury to the south and Oswestry to the west. It is accessible via the A495 heading west to Oswestry (20 miles), the A525 east to Stoke (25 miles), the A41 north to Chester (21 miles), the A49 north to Warrington (39 miles), the A41 south to Newport (20 miles) and on to Wolverhampton (40 miles) and the A49 south to Shrewsbury (20 miles). The total population within an 10 mile radius is approximately 84,100.

Whitchurch is also on the national rail network on the Manchester to Shrewsbury line.

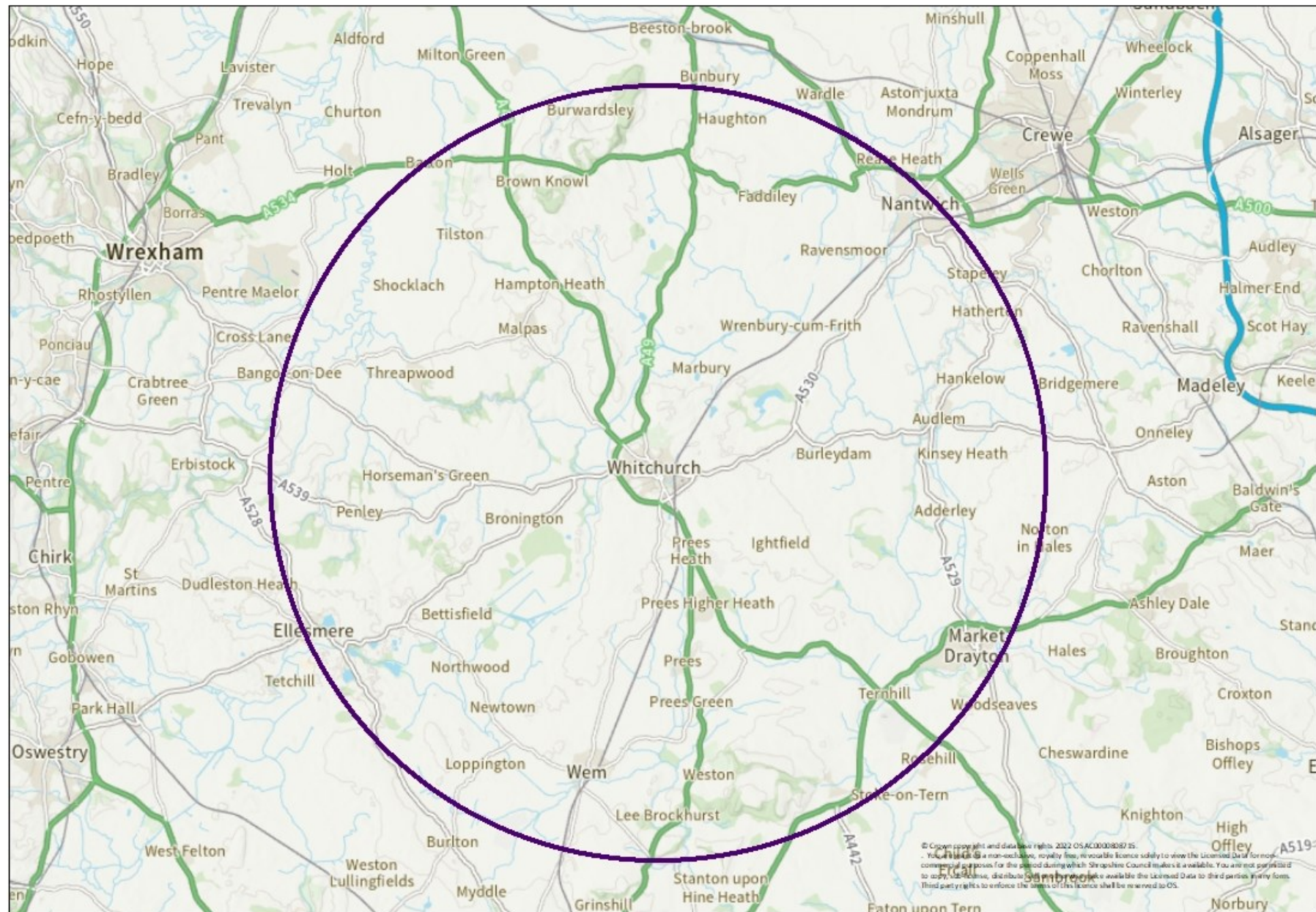
Whitchurch is an important employment hub, providing approximately 3,800 jobs across the town council area (*ONS Business Register and Employment Survey, 2023*). Key sectors include:

- Retail (19.9% of jobs)
- Transport & storage (12.6% of jobs)
- Accommodation and food services (12.6% of jobs)
- Health (12.0% of jobs)
- Manufacturing (8.0% of jobs)

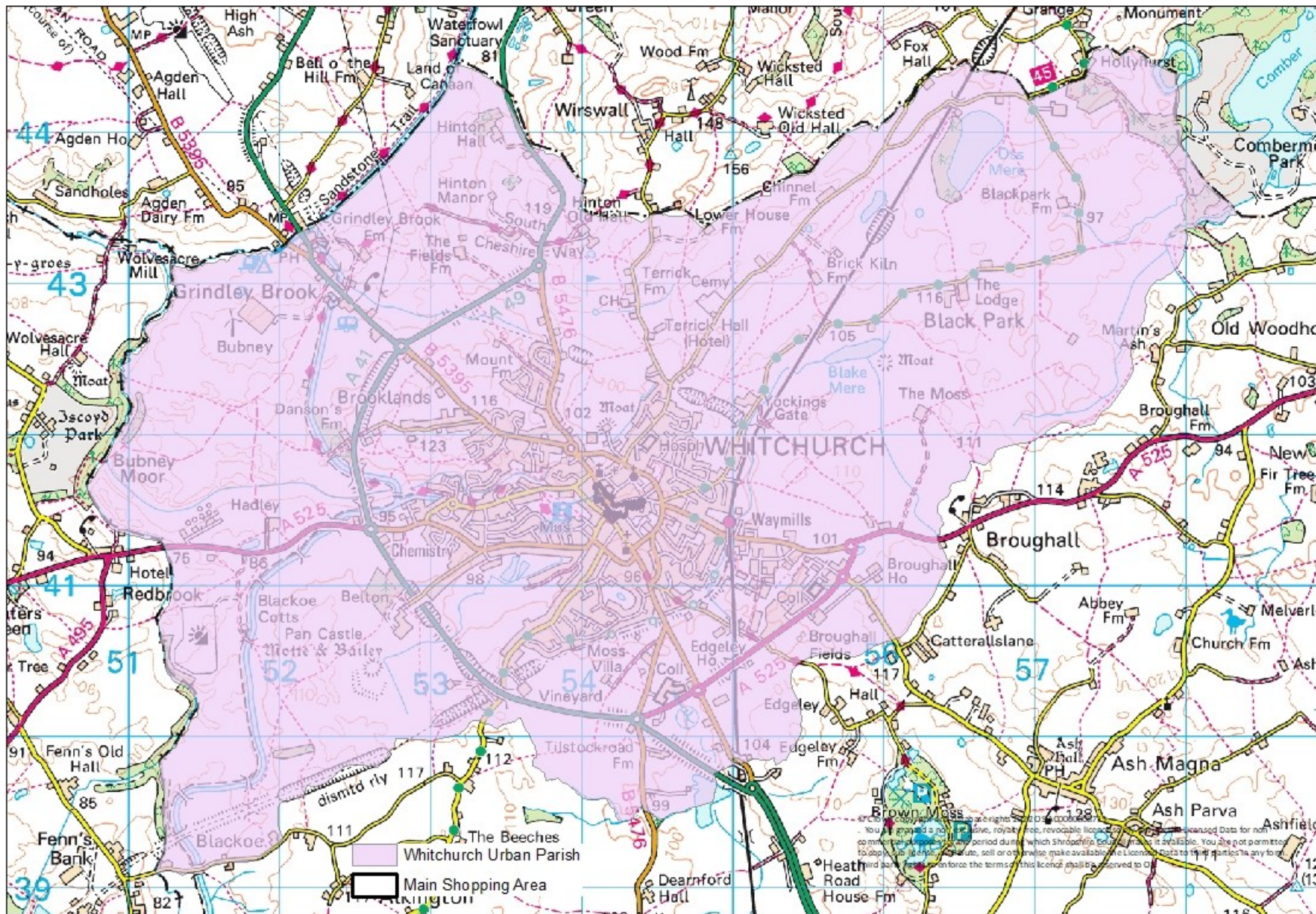
Overall, Whitchurch town council area (depicted on Map 3) covers an area of 2,381 hectares. The main shopping area (depicted on Map 4) is much smaller than this, at around 2 hectares.

The town comprises predominantly independent retail, although the centre is large enough to have attracted a number of chains, particularly in the comparison retail and financial and professional service sectors. A market is held every Friday at the Market Hall offering a wide variety of stalls. The Saturday Makers Market, held on the first Saturday of each month, showcases artisan crafts, homemade producers and tasty food from the local area.

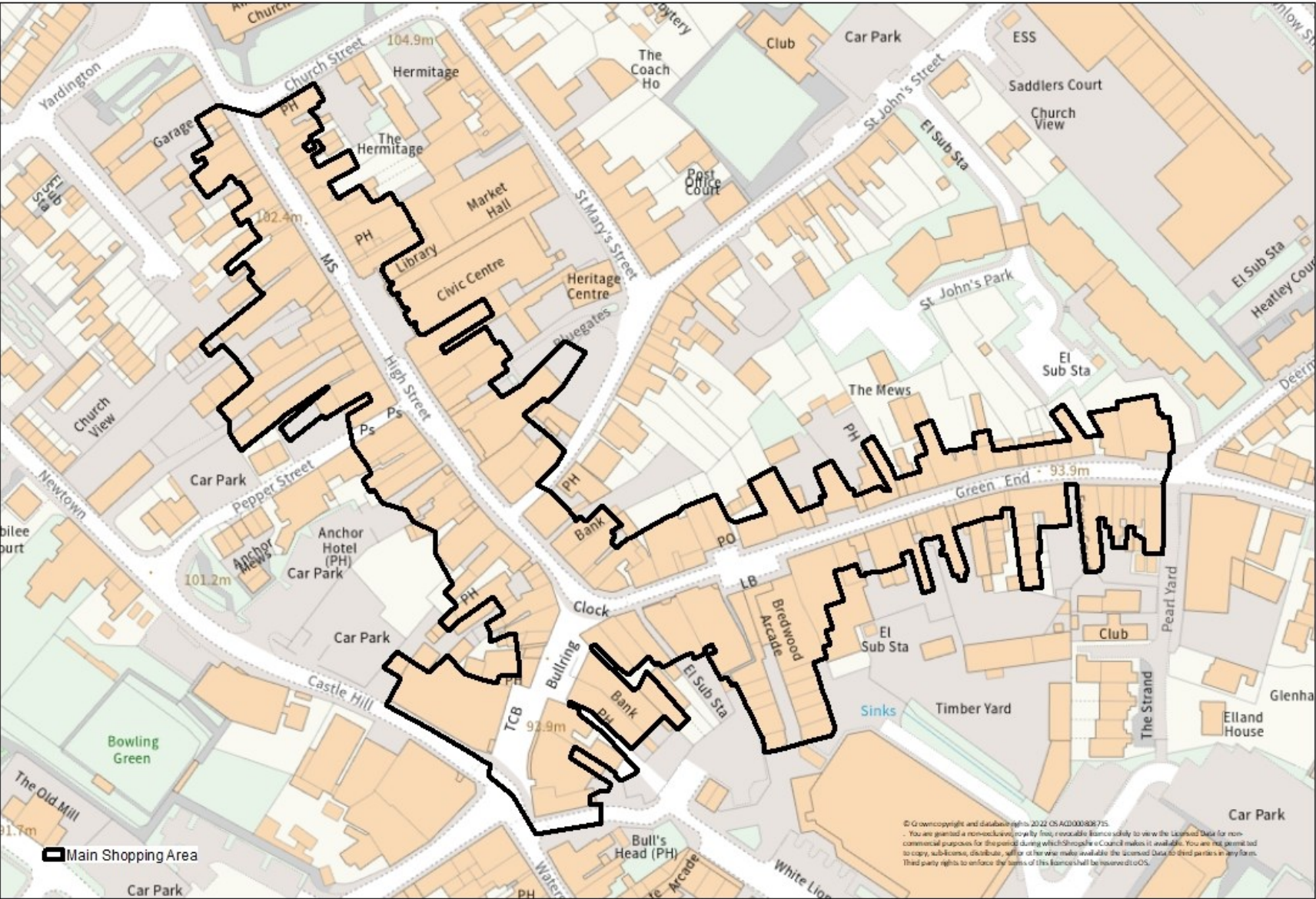
Map 2: Location of Whitchurch, showing 10 mile radius



Map 3: Whitchurch Town Council Area



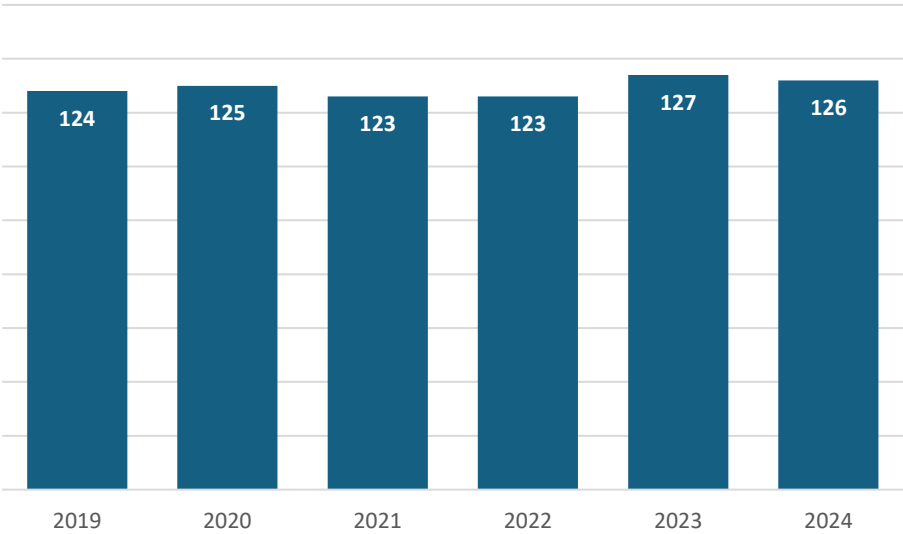
Map 4: Main Retail Shopping Area and Survey Boundary



Key Audit Results

There are a total of 126 commercial premises within the Whitchurch survey area. These are primarily in Green End (57 business premises), High Street (61 business premises) with a small number (8) in Watergate Street. Gross floor space allocated to these businesses is over 15,500m² (41% in Green End, 51% in High Street and 8% in Watergate Street). The average store size is 123m² with units ranging in size from 23m² to 904m². Compared with the other tier 2 retail centres in Shropshire, the average store size is comparatively small, albeit larger than the average in Ludlow and on a par with Market Drayton. Whitchurch is notably smaller than Oswestry, Bridgnorth and Ludlow in terms of the number of stores trading, and is slightly smaller than Market Drayton. However, a number of key stores that serve the town are located outside of the main retail zone (as is also the case in Market Drayton).

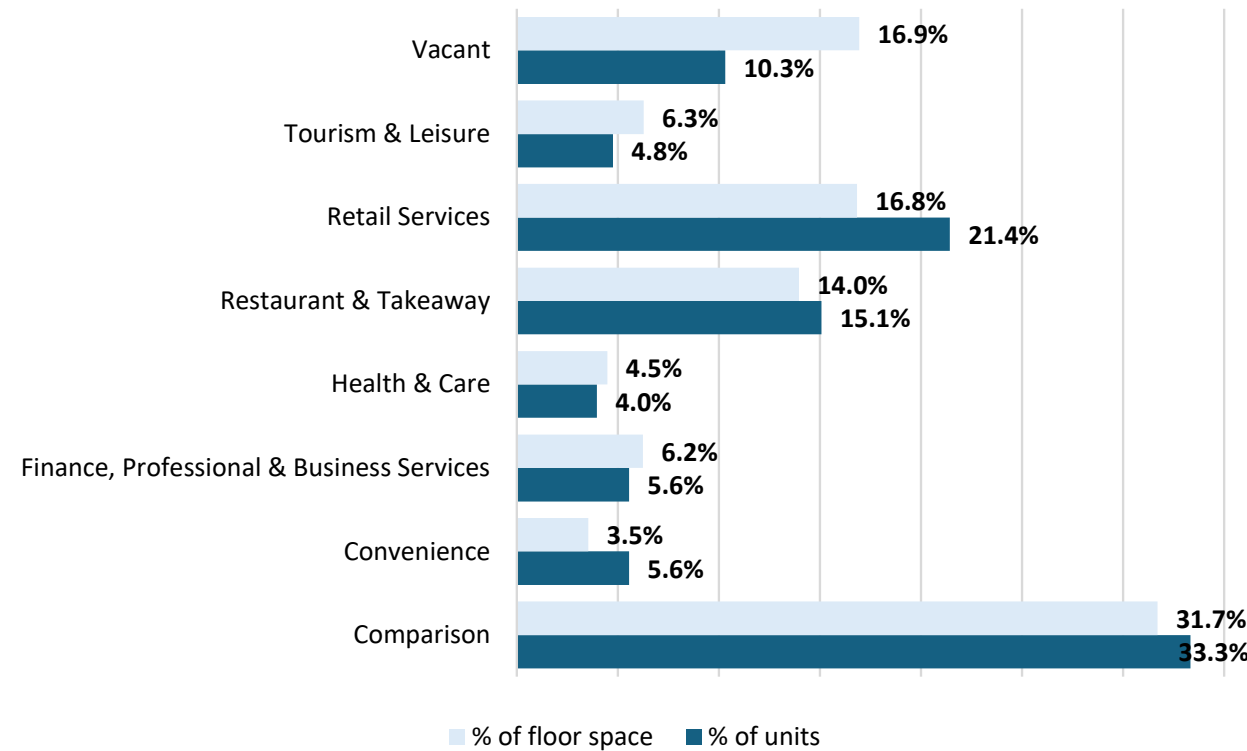
Chart 1: Number of Commercial Premises in Whitchurch, 2019-2024



The number of commercial premises in Whitchurch has changed slightly since 2019. An additional premise was created in 2020 by splitting one premise into two. In 2021, two previously vacant premises in Watergate Street were converted into the Beacon Church, and as such are no longer classified as commercial. This reduced the commercial floor space in the town by almost 800m². There were no further changes to either store numbers or floor space in 2022. In 2023, a formally vacant premise was divided into five new units within St Mary’s Arcade. This resulted in a net increase of four commercial operators, although there was no expansion in floor space. Two units merged in 2024, again resulting in no change in commercial floor space.

There are 42 comparison retailers in Whitchurch town centre, which cover a combined gross floor space of just under 4,900m². This is the equivalent of 33.3% of units and 31.7% of space. This type of store accounts for the highest share of both units and floor space, and the amount of space dedicated to comparison retail is higher than any other towns in Shropshire except Ludlow and Church Stretton.

Chart 2: Breakdown of Commercial Premises by Classification, 2024



Retail service businesses are also well represented in Whitchurch, especially in unit terms, with 27 stores operating, which is more than a fifth of the total. These units tend to be smaller than average, and hence account for just 16.8% of gross floor space.

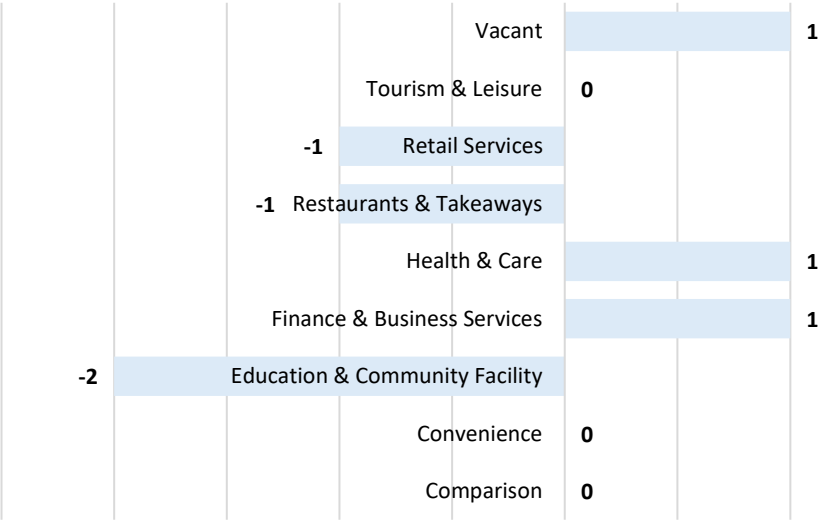
There are 19 restaurants and takeaways in Whitchurch town centre, which is the equivalent of 15.1% of units and 14.0% of floor space. 5.6% of units (and 6.2% of floor space) is attributable to financial institutions and professional and business services providers. A small proportion of outlets in Whitchurch are attributable to the convenience retail, health care provision and tourism & leisure categories.

10.3% of units across the town centre are vacant, which is the equivalent of 16.9% of gross commercial floor space.

Change since 2023

There has been little change in the composition of the Whitchurch town centre commercial sector between September 2023 and September 2024. The town has seen a decrease of two operators in education and community facilities (including the temporary closure of the Civic Centre). There is also one fewer retail services provider and one less restaurant/takeaway. In contrast, there is one more operator in finance and business services and in health care, plus an additional vacant premise.

Chart 4: Change in Number of Units by Category, 2023/2024



Although the overall composition within the town remains largely unaltered, the level of churn—premises changing hands or use—has been on a par with overall churn across Shropshire across over the last five years, but has been elevated in 2023 and 2024 at 17% and 18% respectively.

In 2024, just over a quarter of all churn was attributable to new vacancies, while just over a fifth was caused by previously empty premises becoming filled. Since 2019, similar numbers of premises have become vacant and have been filled. In every year except 2021/22, over half of all churn has been attributable to other change including stores that have changed hands, purpose or branding.

Chart 5: Level of Business Churn 2019—2024

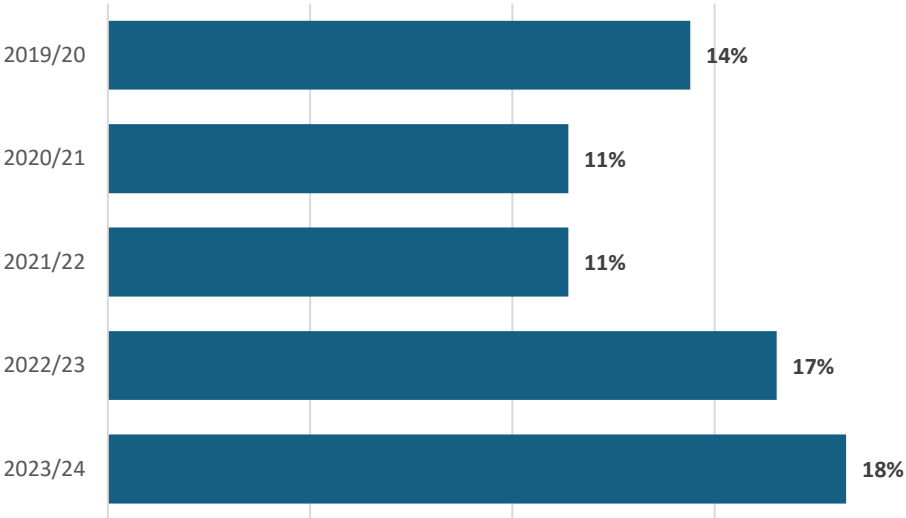
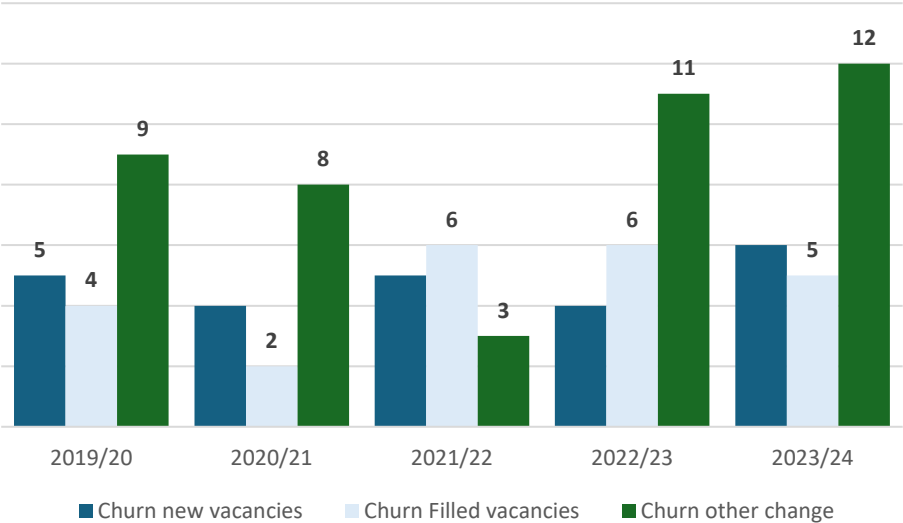


Chart 6: Breakdown of Business Churn 2019—2024

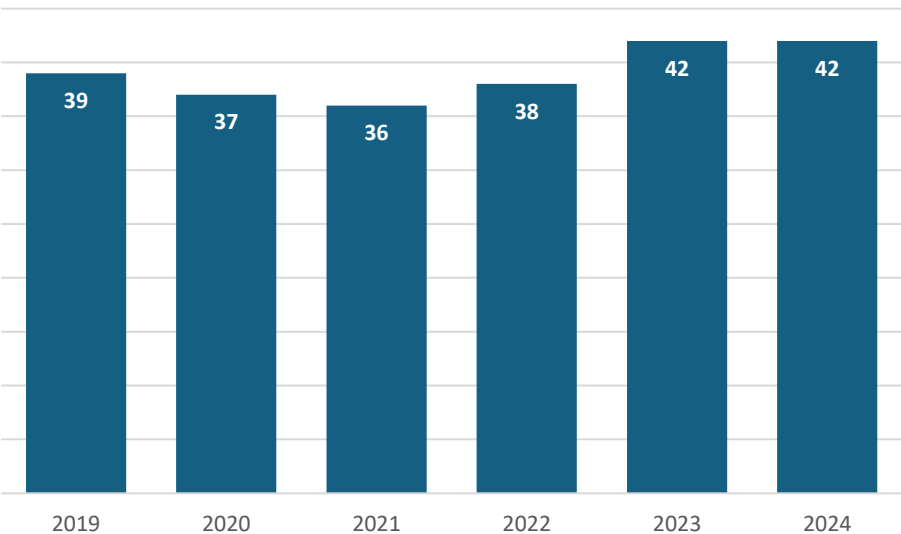


Comparison Retail

The largest proportion of commercial units and space is dedicated to the comparison retail category, accounting for 33% of units and a marginally lower share of gross floor space (32%). This is the equivalent of 42 stores with an average size of 117m². Comparison retail has a higher representation in Whitchurch than in any other town except Ludlow and Church Stretton.

The number of comparison stores in the town has fluctuated in recent years, falling slightly in 2020 and 2021. The sector has started to recover following the Covid-19 pandemic with two additional outlets operating in 2022 and a further four in 2023. The number remained stable at 42 in 2024.

Chart 6: Number of Comparison Retailers, 2019-2024



Within the town there are seven clothes shops (all independents); three clothes shops have opened since the 2022 audit, and St Mary’s Arcade is a popular location for clothing retailers. This has significantly bolstered the town’s clothing offer following the closure of the M & Co chain clothing store between the 2019 and 2020 audits.

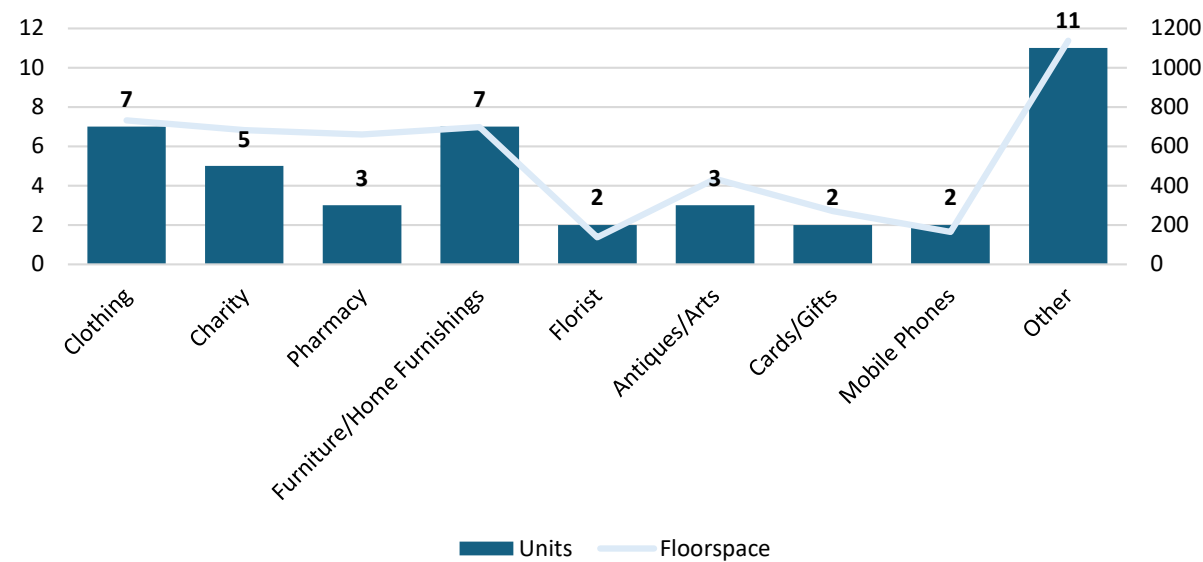
There are also seven shops that can be grouped together as furniture/furnishings/home improvement outlets (one bathroom and one kitchen outfitter, a carpet store, an interiors store, a furnishings store and two homeware retailers). A new homeware store began trading in 2024.

Five charity shops operate in the town, which represents an increase of one over the last year.

There are two florists, two mobile phone stores, three pharmacies, three antiques stores/art shops as well two stores selling gifts and/or greetings cards. There was one each of the following store types: book store; crafts; electrical; picture framing; jewellery; vape store; toys; variety; pram and nursery accessories, renewable energy equipment. In addition, a record store opened between the 2023 and 2024 audits.

Although most traders are independent, Whitchurch hosts the following multiples: WH Smith; Boots; Rowlands; Card Factory

Chart 7: Breakdown of Comparison Retail by Type, 2024



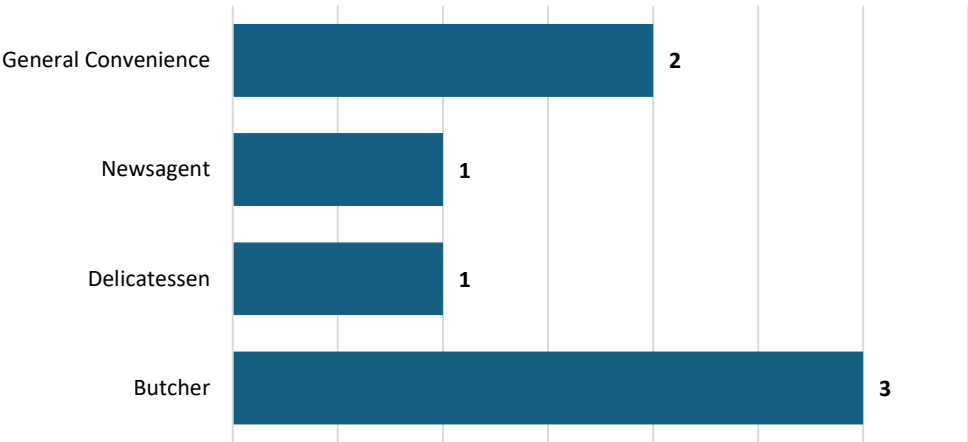
Convenience Retail

There are seven convenience stores within the main shopping area of Whitchurch. These account for 6% of all units and for 4% of gross floor space. As well as three butchers (one of which opened in 2022), there is a delicatessen, a newsagent and two general convenience stores. One general convenience retailer closed between the 2023 and 2024 audits, but another opened.

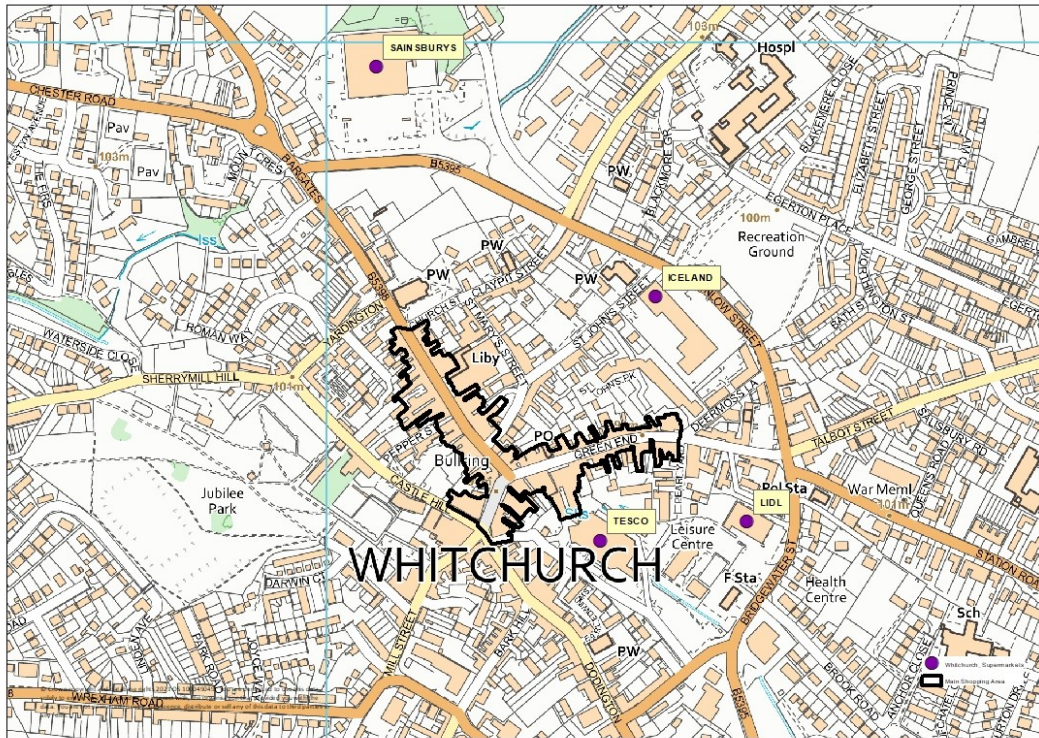
There is no specialist greengrocer n the town centre.

There are two cafés in Whitchurch which also operate as bakeries (classified as cafés for the purposes of analysis) and the delicatessen also has a small café area.

Chart 8: Breakdown of Convenience Retail by Type, 2024



Map 5: Location of Whitchurch's Main Convenience Stores



Convenience retail accounts for a relatively low proportion of the retail offer in Whitchurch. It should be noted that the town's main supermarkets – Sainsbury, Tesco, Lidl and Iceland – are all located a short distance from the main town centre shopping streets, as shown on the adjacent map.

This means that compared with other towns, a relatively small proportion of units and floor space is allocated to the convenience sector.

Restaurants & Takeaways

15% of units in Whitchurch are attributable to restaurants and takeaways, with this category accounting for a slightly lower proportion of gross floor space (14%).

The number of operators in the restaurant and takeaway sector has risen by two since 2019, although the number did decline by one in 2024.

Chart 10: Breakdown of Restaurant/Takeaway Units by Type, 2024

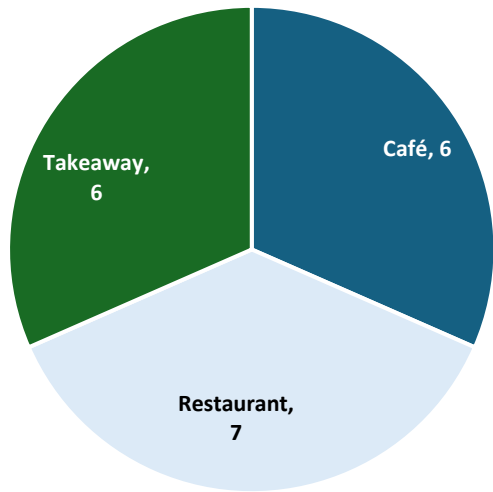
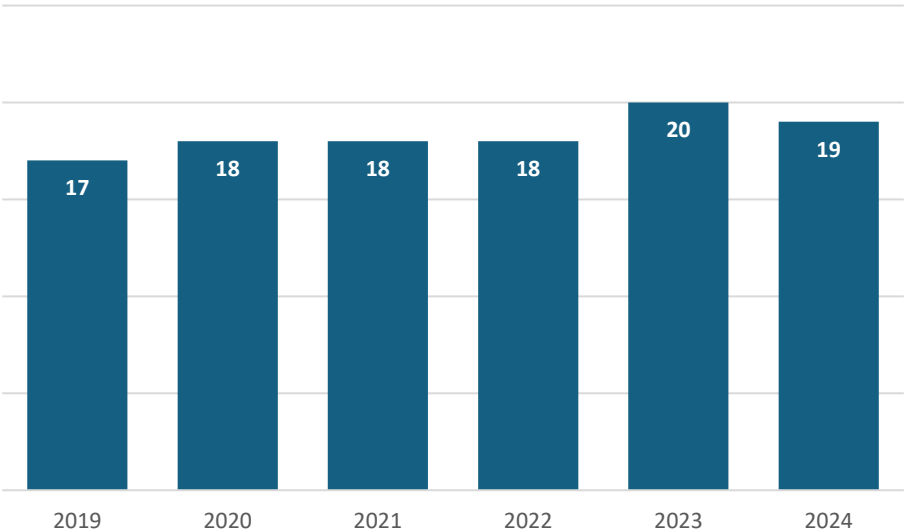


Chart 9: Number of Restaurants & Takeaways, 2019-2024



The 19 units are split between cafés (30%), restaurants (35%) and takeaways (30%). Takeaways account for a lower share of floor space (23%) while restaurants have a disproportionately high share of floor space (42%). Two of the cafés double up as a bakery. Two cafes opened in 2024, one closed and another changed its name. A restaurant also ceased trading between the 2023 and 2024 audits.

The range of cuisines on offer by Whitchurch restaurants includes Thai, Chinese, Indian, Italian and modern British. In terms of takeaways, there is a fish and chip shop, a Chinese takeaway and pizza.

There are no chain stores in the restaurant and takeaway category in Whitchurch, with the exception of a Costa coffee shop.

Tourism & Leisure

Also within the hospitality sector, there are four public houses, which is one more than in 2022 , taking the number back up to the level recorded in 2021. These take up approximately 760m² gross floor space, the equivalent of 78% of all floor space attributable to tourism & leisure facilities in the town. There is a lack of guest accommodation (B&Bs or hotel bed spaces) within the town centre, although there is one hotel (or public house with rooms). Guest accommodation outside the main shopping area of the town include the Hill Valley Hotel, to the north of Whitchurch, Dodington Lodge, just south of the main shopping streets and Willington Lodge, a luxury wedding venue.

There is also a pottery activity centre within the main retail zone of the town. There was no change in the sector in 2024.

Finance & Business Services

There are seven commercial operators in the finance and business services arena in Whitchurch town centre, accounting for just under 1,000m² of gross floor space.

The number has reduced considerably since 2020; losses include the closure of Barclays Bank and the Halifax. The classification is under-represented in Whitchurch, with proportionally fewer operators than any other town except Highley and Albrighton.

Chart 12: Number of Financial & Business Services Providers by Type, 2024

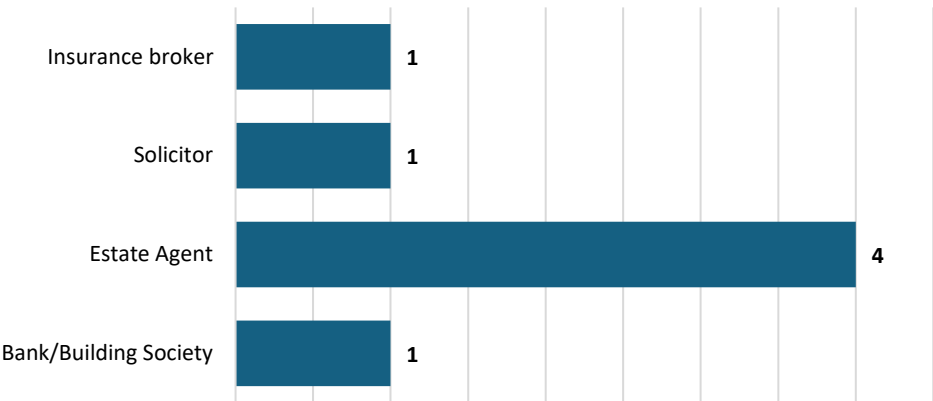
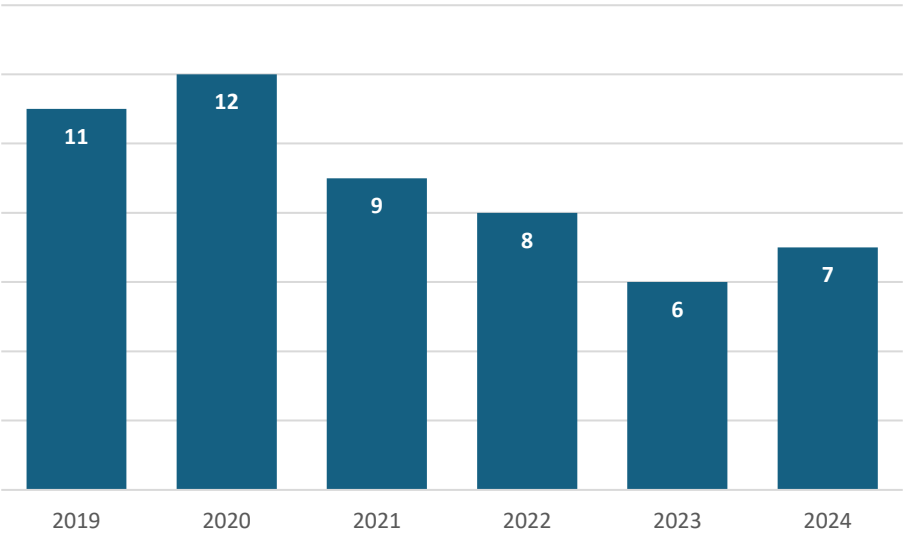


Chart 11: Number of Financial & Business Services Providers, 2019-2024



With the closure of the Halifax in 2023, Whitchurch is now served by just one Bank (Lloyds TSB); There are four estate agents (Halls, Barbers and AJ Reid and Get Moving). Get moving opened in a previously unoccupied premise in 2024.

Also included within this category are a solicitor and an insurance broker.

Retail Services

There are 27 retail service businesses operating in Whitchurch town centre, with these accounting for over 2,600m² of gross floor space. This is the equivalent of 21% of all units in the town and 17% of floor space.

The number of operators in this sector rose by one a year between 2019 and 2022, but there was no further change in 2023. In 2024, the number fell back by one with the closure of a hair salon.

Chart 14: Breakdown of Retail Services by Type, 2024

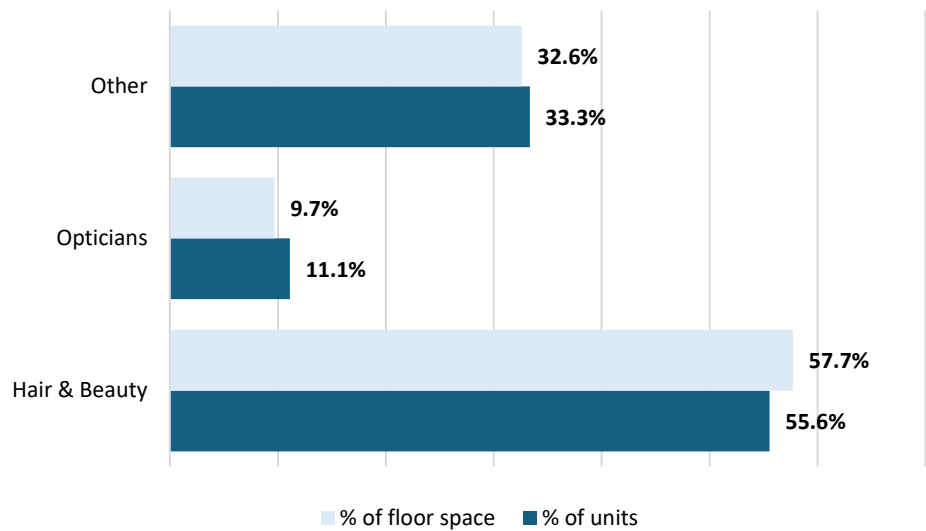
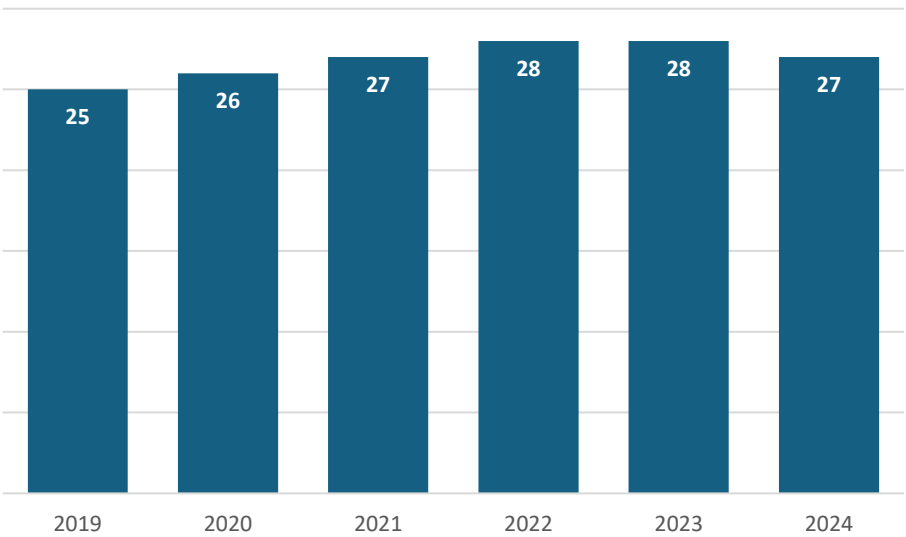


Chart 13: Number of Retail Services Providers, 2019-2024



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 56% of units and 58% of floor space. In addition, there are three opticians in the town. Amongst other services provided in the town (by one operator only) are computer repairs, dog grooming, bookmaker, funeral director, post office, photographer, shoe repairs, travel agent and tattoo artist.

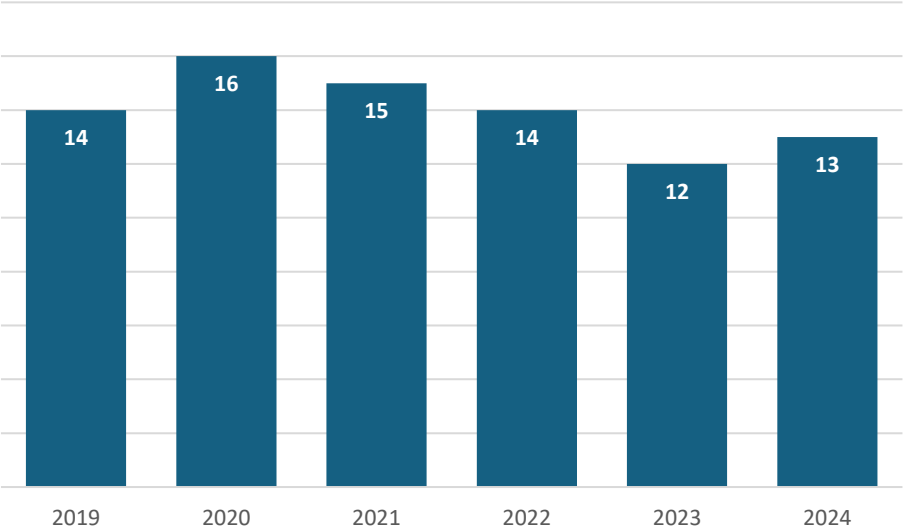
Health & Care

There are two dental practices operating within the main Whitchurch shopping area as well as two home care agencies. There is also a podiatrist, which opened between the 2023 and 2024 audits.

Vacant Units

10% of Whitchurch town centre outlets are vacant (17% of gross floor space). In unit terms this is around average for Shropshire; it compares favourably with the national average, which stood at 14.0% in the fourth quarter of 2023 according to BRC (based on high street data only). The size of vacant units ranges from 38m² to 904m² and because the average size of the unoccupied premises is large, the amount of vacant commercial space is higher than the Shropshire average.

Chart 15: Number of Vacant Premises, 2019-2024



The number of unoccupied premises in Whitchurch peaked at 16 in 2020 but has declined in each subsequent year until 2024 when it rose by one. It should be noted that two premises which were classed as vacant in 2019 and 2020 are no longer classified as commercial properties and consequently, these aren't included in the 2021-2024 figures.

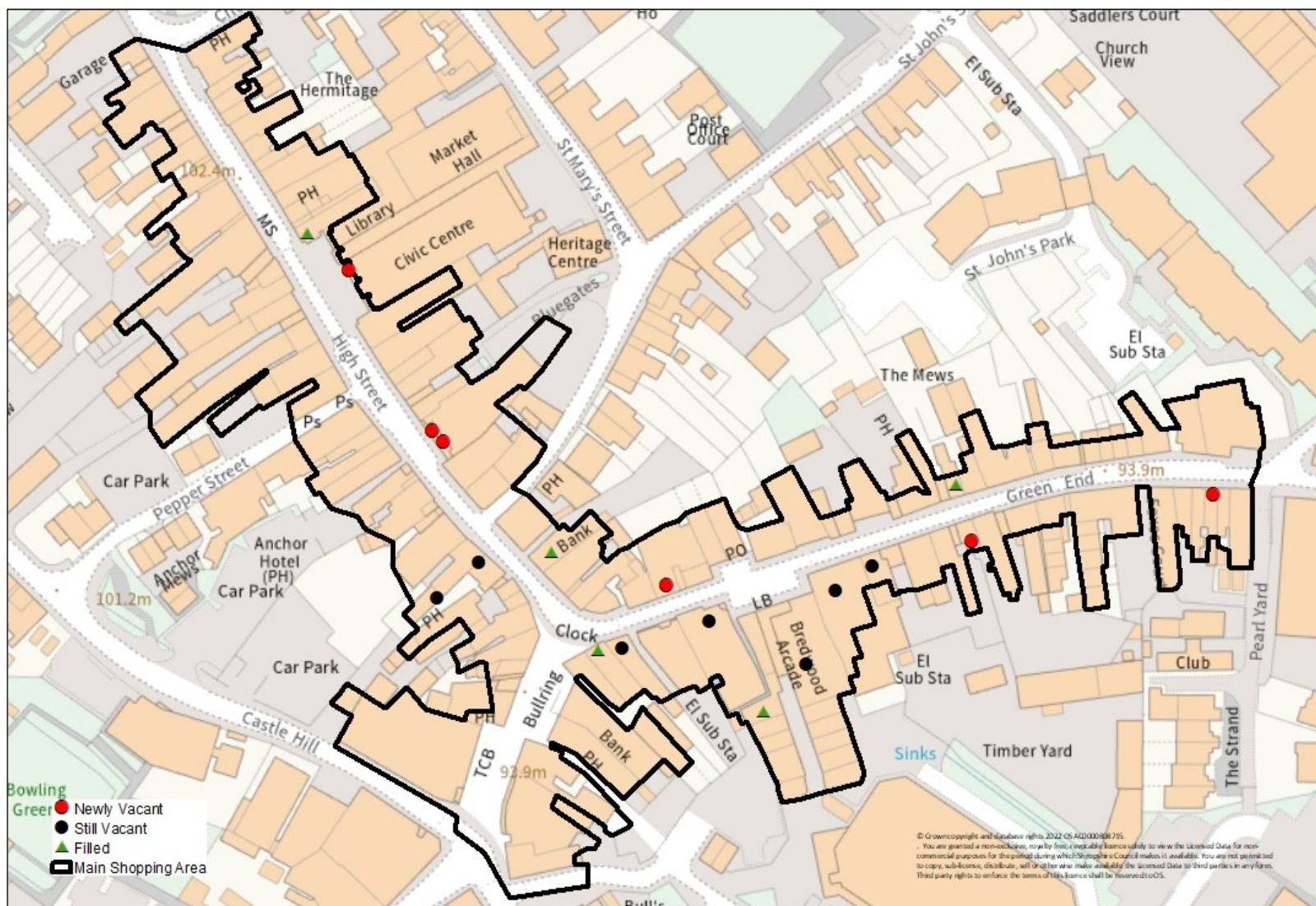
There are eight vacant units on Green End and five on the High Street (including the former National Westminster bank). Almost half of all vacant premises in Whitchurch in 2024 have been empty for less than a year. Three stores have been empty since at least 2019.

Map 6: Location of Vacant Commercial Premises, 2024



The number of vacant commercial premises in Whitchurch increased by one to 13 in 2024. Seven of the premises which had been vacant in 2023 were still empty in 2024, and there were six new vacancies. Five premises which were vacant in 2023 had been filled in 2024.

Map 7: Change in Number & Location of Vacant Commercial Premises, 2023-2024



Residential Premises

Although the town centre contains concentrations of commercial enterprises, there is also a significant amount of residential property within the main shopping centre. In total, 148 residential premises are located in the audit area, of which the vast majority are flats (133 or 90%) which are largely located above retail or other commercial outlets. There is a cluster of terraced housing at the eastern end of Green End. Flats are primarily located on the High Street, but there are also some residences above commercial units on Green End. The number of flats in Whitchurch town centre increased by 10 between 2020 and 2021 with an additional four flats coming on board between 2022 and 2024.

Map 8: Location of Residential Premises in Whitchurch Town Centre

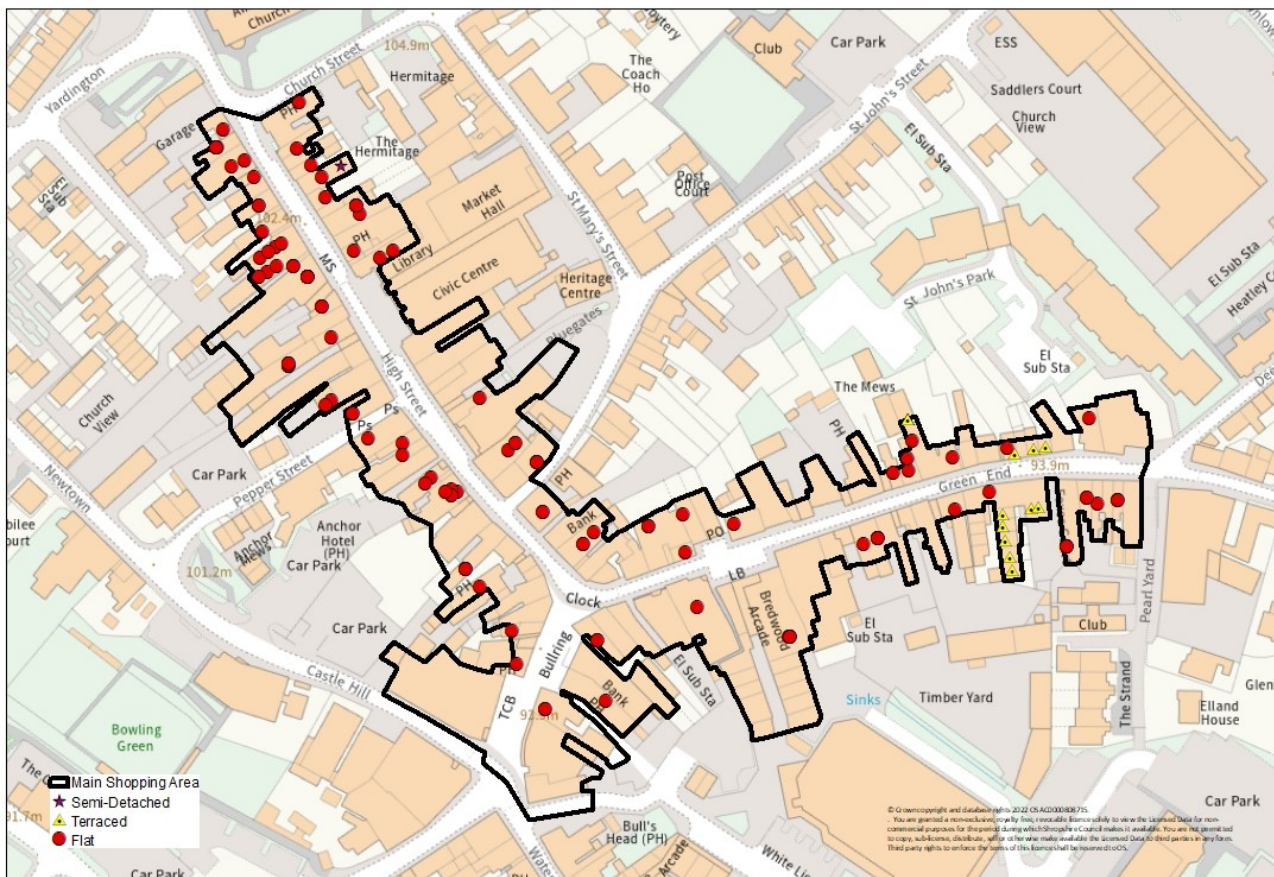


Chart 16: Breakdown of Residential Properties by Type

