Ludlow: Town Centre Audit Analysis, 2024











Shropshire Council

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Introduction

An audit of businesses operating in Ludlow'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. Ludlow centre was first audited in April 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 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

- 235 commercial units, occupying 28,500m^2 gross floor space.
- 4th largest centre in Shropshire behind Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Bridgnorth, accounting for 9.3% of all Shropshire High Street traders.
- Second highest number of stores per head of population behind Bishop's Castle at a rate of 21.4 units per 1,000 population (13 for Shropshire on average).
- Average store size 121m^2 which is smaller than the average across Shropshire (147m^2) and is also the smallest of the tier two town centres.
- 401 residential premises in the main shopping area, giving a ratio of 0.6:1 commercial versus residential properties.
- Ludlow had a very high level of churn in 2024, with almost a quarter (23%) of premises changing ownership, classification or branding. This followed a year when churn was exceptionally low (just 5% in 2023). Since 2019, churn has been slightly below average compared with the average for Shropshire.
- The highest proportion of commercial units are attributable to comparison retail, which account for 36% of all commercial operations (higher than anywhere else in Shropshire). Despite this, the comparison offer has declined in recent years, following the trend seen in many towns across the country.
- Convenience retail also has an above average representation (8% of units and 19% of floor space).
- In contrast, there are comparatively few businesses operating in retail services (14% compared with 19% for Shropshire). Only Bishop's Castle, Much Wenlock and Church Stretton have a lower representation of retail services than Ludlow.
- Ludlow has a slightly above average representation of finance, professional and business services providers and supports an average number of tourism and leisure operators. The number of restaurants and takeaways is marginally lower than average.
- The number of vacant premises has risen significantly since the pandemic, with the number of vacant units rising from nine in 2019 to 25 in 2024. The vacancy rate remains on a par with the Shropshire average (11%) despite this increase.

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. Ludlow Business Park and Ludlow Eco Park are notable employment hubs which are away from the town centre and therefore 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.

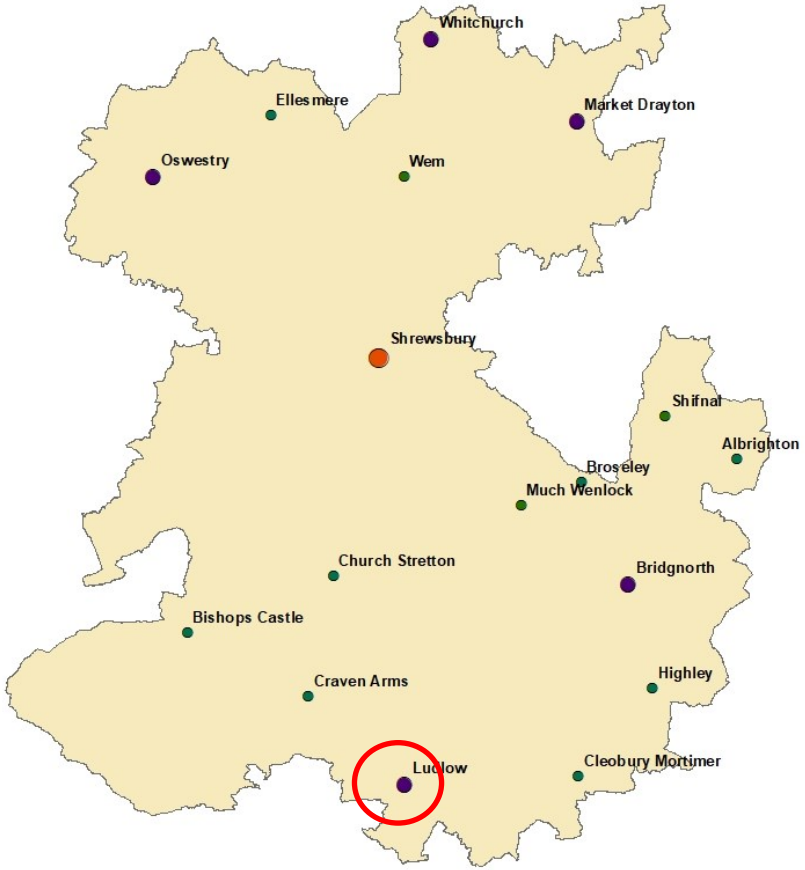
In order to benchmark Shropshire towns against each other in an appropriate manner, the following hierarchy has been adopted:

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

Map 1: Shropshire's Main Retail Centres



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Ludlow retail centre is about the same size as Bridgnorth in terms of the number of commercial operators. It is smaller than Oswestry, but notably larger than either Market Drayton or Whitchurch.

About Ludlow

Ludlow is located in the south of Shropshire close to the border with Herefordshire. Today the town has a population of 10,041 and 4.833 households *(2021 Census).* The town's population has declined slightly since 2011 (by 2.2%). It is the sixth largest town in the county behind Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Bridgnorth, Market Drayton and Whitchurch.

Ludlow is on the A49 which links north to Shrewsbury (29 miles) and south to Hereford (23 miles). The A456 is five miles south of the town centre and provides travel east to Kidderminster. Ludlow is on the main railway network, which provides links northwards to Shrewsbury and Manchester and southwards to Hereford and Cardiff. Total population within a 10 mile radius is 46,600.

Ludlow is an important employment hub, fourth in size in Shropshire to Shrewsbury, Oswestry and Market Drayton. It provides approximately 4,800 jobs across the town council area *(ONS Business Register and Employment Survey, 2023)*. Key sectors include:

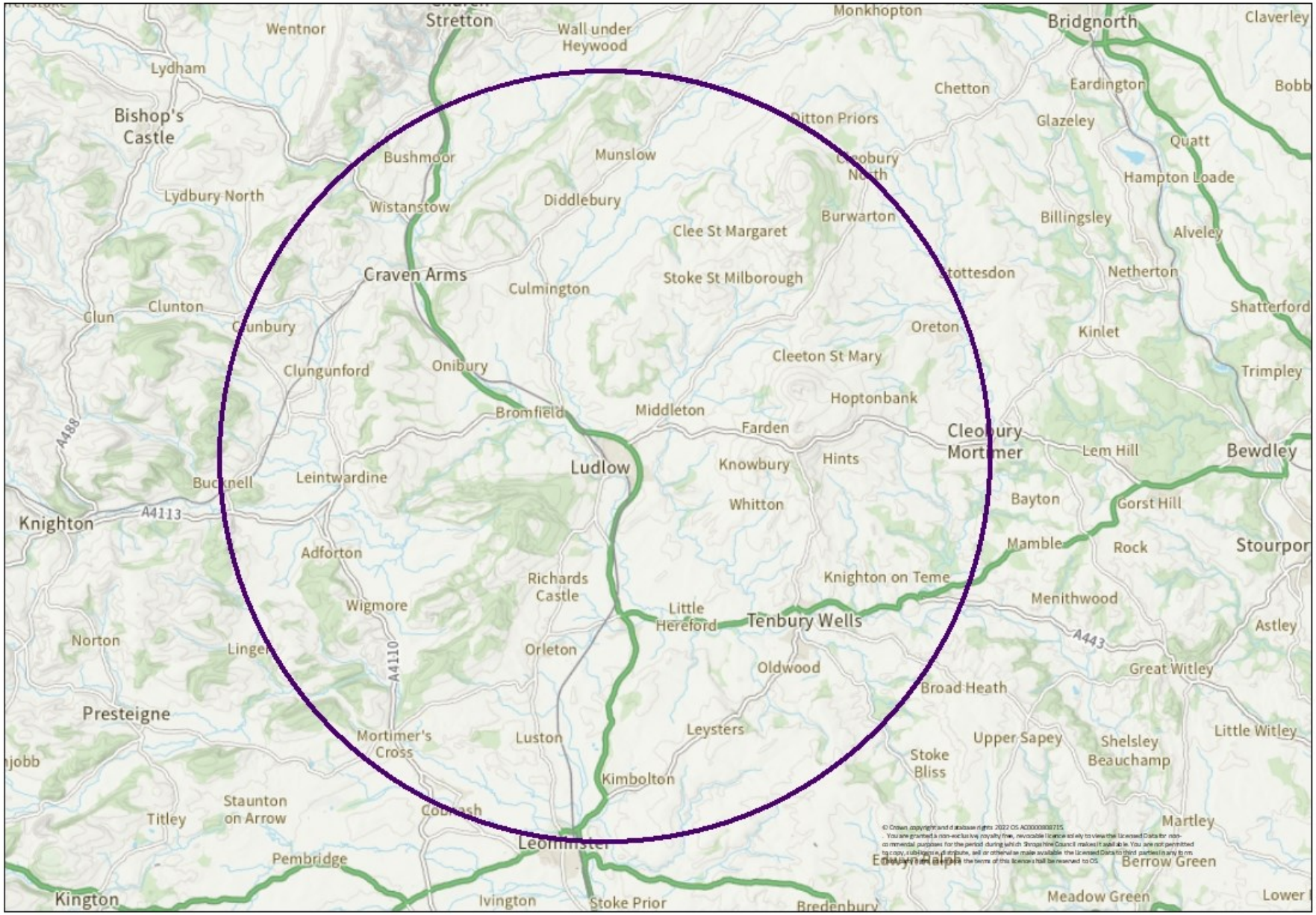
- Retail (17.9% of jobs)
- Health (12.6% of jobs)
- Professional, Scientific and Technical (11.6% of jobs)
- Accommodation & Food Services (10.5% of jobs)

Overall, Ludlow town council area (depicted on Map 3) covers an area of 454 hectares. The main shopping area (depicted on Map 4) is much smaller than this, at around 12 hectares. This is nonetheless notably larger than the main shopping areas in Market Drayton or Whitchurch, albeit smaller than Oswestry. It is on a par with Bridgnorth.

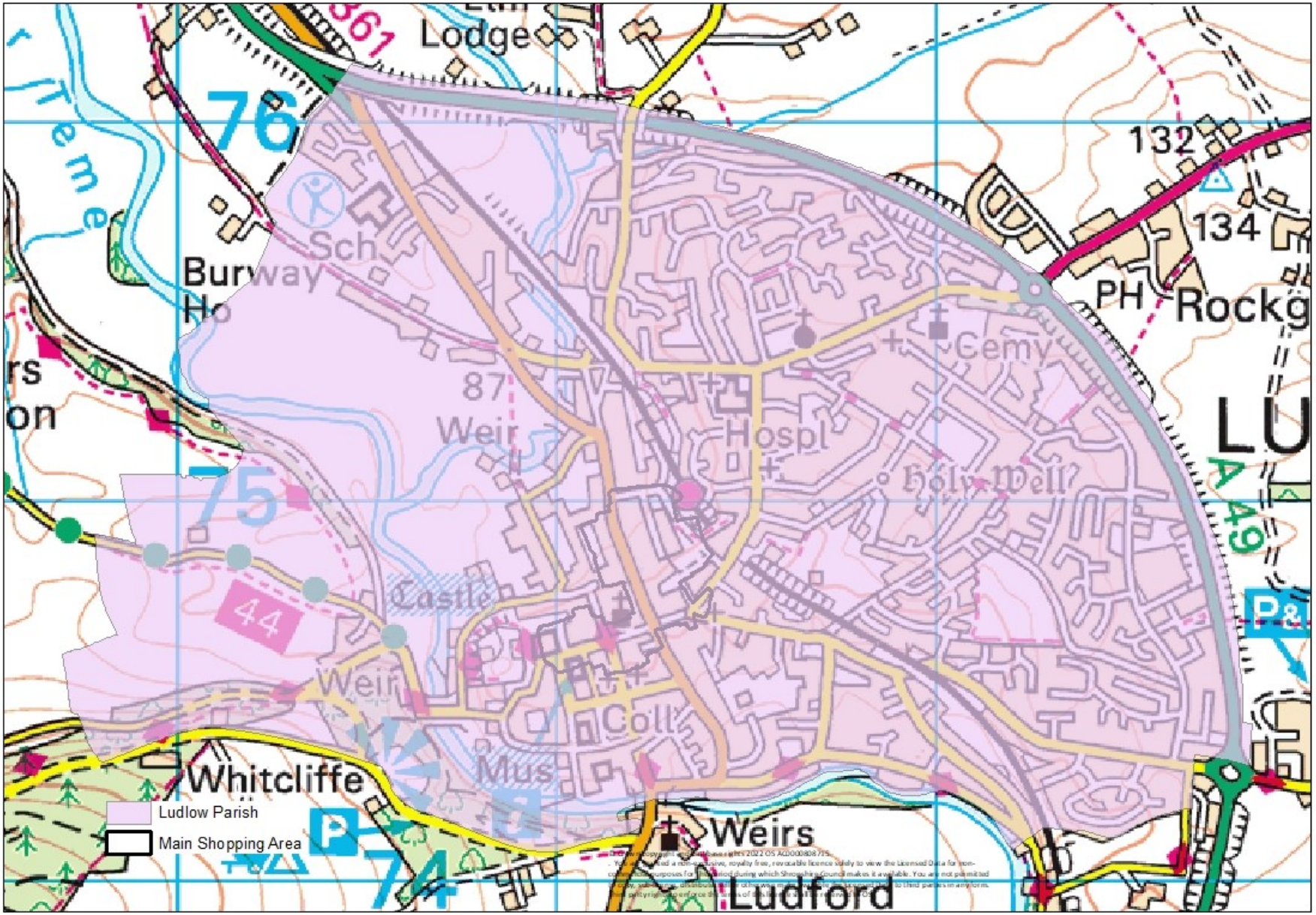
Ludlow is the main market town in south Shropshire. It is a thriving centre with a mix of independent stores, boutiques, pubs and restaurants. Ludlow Castle and grounds is a key attraction and there are many attractive buildings within the main shopping streets, with around 500 of them being listed. The market square is home to regular markets offering a wide range of local produce. Ludlow is renowned for its fine foods and ales and hosts a number of food based festivals throughout the year.

Ludlow market takes place in the main square in front of the castle, operating four days a week throughout the year and hosting many speciality events.

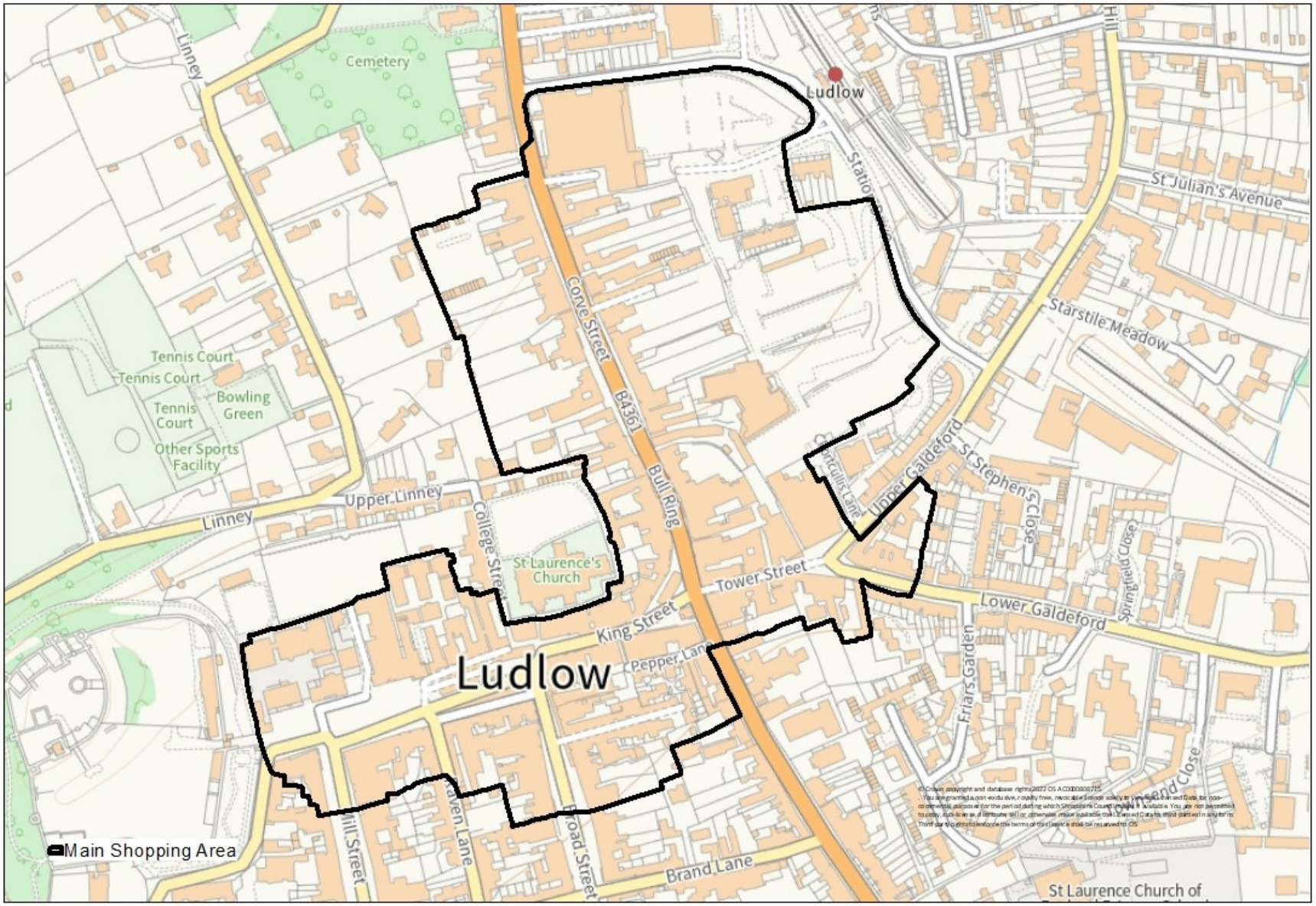
Map 2: Location of Ludlow showing 10 mile radius



Map 3: Ludlow Town Council



Map 4: Main Retail Shopping Area and Survey Boundary



Key Audit Results

There are total of 235 commercial premises within the Ludlow survey area accounting for approximately 28,500m^2 of gross floor space. Units are on the small size at an average of 121m^2, which is smaller than the average in any of the other tier 2 Shropshire towns. This reflects the large number of small and specialist boutiques which trade in the town.

The number of commercial operators in the town has edged down slightly over the past three years. Two premises were converted into residential premises in 2022 (one a former B&B which was empty in 2021 and a former gallery now seemingly serving as a private residence only). Another premises was converted from commercial to residential in both 2023 and 2024. There has also been some reconfiguration of premises in the town, with some units either splitting or merging when ownership changes.

However, there has been very little change in the amount of commercial sites in the town ranging between 235 (2024) and 241 (2021) between 2019 and 2024.

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

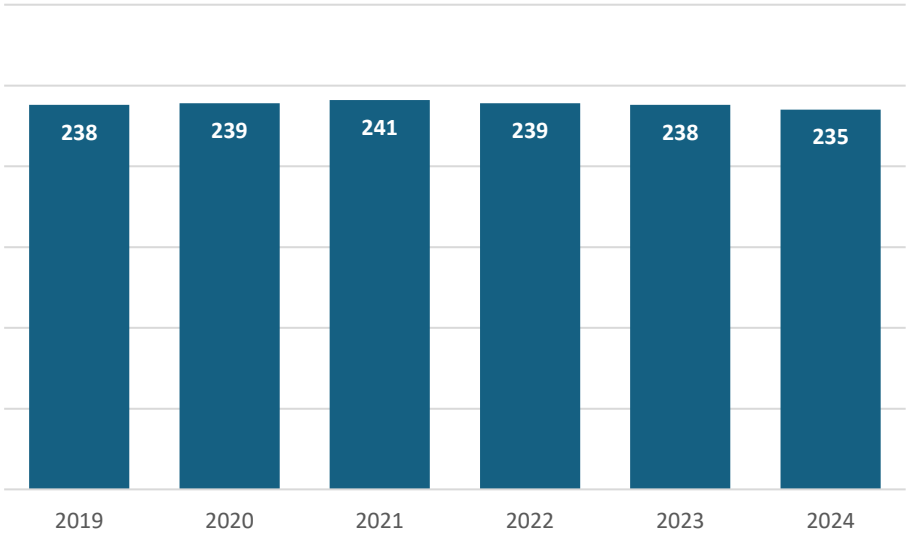


Chart 2: Location of Businesses Operating in Ludlow, 2024

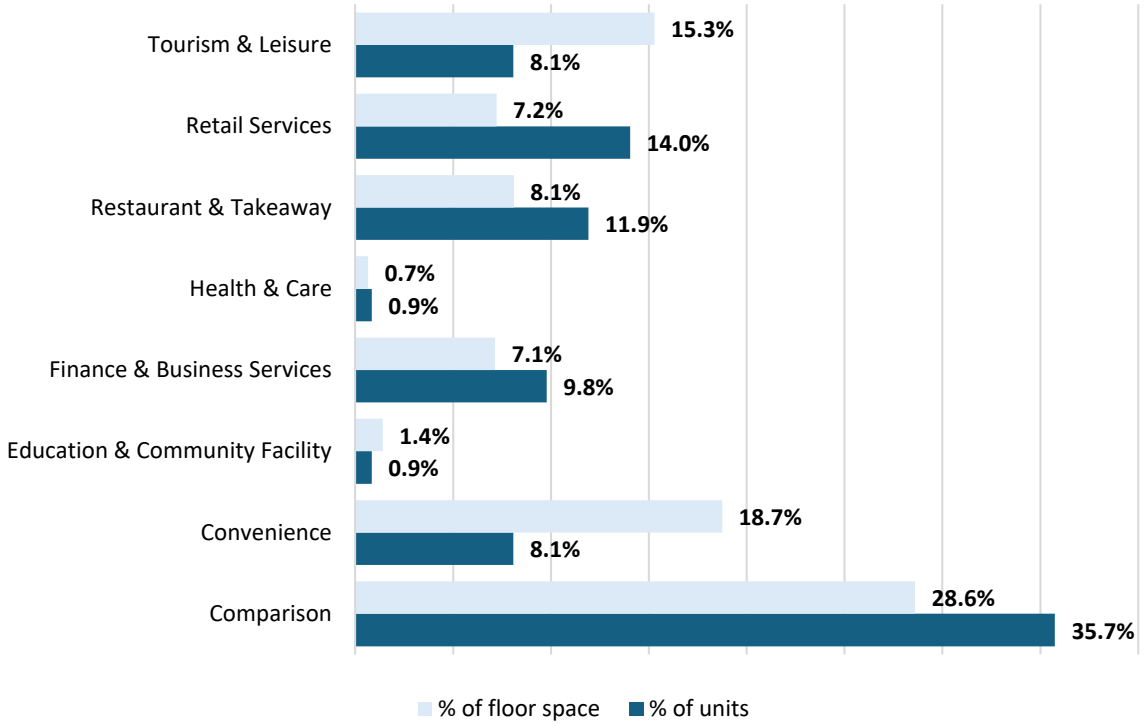
	% of units	% of floor space
Broad Street	11.5%	11.3%
Bull Ring	17.0%	14.9%
Castle Street/Square	8.1%	10.9%
Church Street	5.1%	3.3%
Corve Street	17.4%	30.2%
High Street	6.4%	2.3%
King Street	7.2%	5.7%
Tower Street	6.8%	4.3%
Other	20.4%	17.1%

A relatively large number of short streets make up Ludlow town centre. There is a high concentration of businesses on Corve Street (41 business premises or 17% of the total) - as they are larger than average, they account for 30% of gross floor space. A similar number of units (40) are located on Bull Ring (15% of floor space). More than one out of 10 commercial units are on Broad Street. Other streets with a significant number of stores operating are Castle Street, Church Street, High Street, King Street and Tower Street. Units are slightly larger than average in Castle Street (as well as Corve Street) but are smaller in Church Street, Tower Street, High Street and King Street.

Business Classifications

Comparison retail units account for a disproportionately high share of the town centre offer in Ludlow, filling 35.7% of all units trading and for 28.6% of floor space. In unit terms, this share is significantly higher than in any of the other shopping centres in Shropshire. As stores in this category in Ludlow tend to be comparatively small in size (less than 100m^2 each on average), the overall floor space allocation is more in line with Bridgnorth and Oswestry.

Chart 3: Breakdown of Ludlow Commercial Premises by Classification, 2024



Retail services, financial, business and professional services and restaurants and takeaways all account for a similar share of commercial units in Ludlow town centre (10-14%). Retail services account for 14% of units, but since these tend to be small in size they take up just 7.2% of gross floor space. Financial and business service providers account for 9.8% of units and 7.1% of floor space, while restaurants and takeaways hold shares of 11.9% and 8.1% of units and floor space respectively. 8.1% of stores are convenience retail. The presence of a number of main food stores mean that this classification accounts for a high proportion of gross floor space (18.7%).

As an important tourism location, a comparatively high share of the town is dedicated to tourism and leisure facilities—8.1% of units and 15.3% of gross floor space. A small proportion of the town is allocated to educational and community facilities and health and care provision.

10.6% of units are empty, which is the equivalent of 12.8% of gross floor space.

Change since 2023

The main change in the town centre offer in Ludlow between September 2023 and 2024 has been a decrease in the number of finance and business service operators, with six fewer operating in 2024 than in 2023. The comparison sector has also declined by five outlets. One retail service store was lost as well as one convenience store and one education/community facility.

To offset this, there are now three more tourism and leisure businesses in the town, as well as two additional restaurants/takeaways and two health and care providers. The number of vacant units has also increased by four.

Chart 4: Change in Number of Units by Category, 2023/24

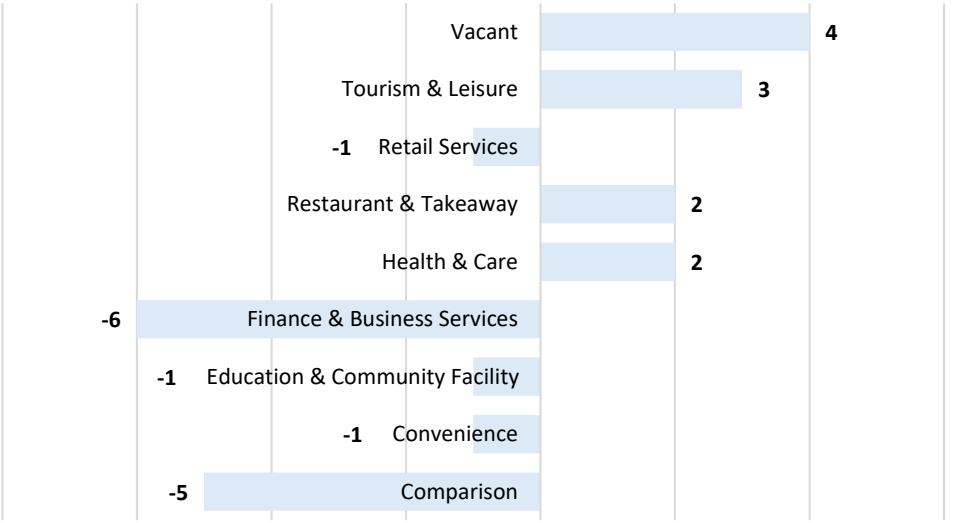
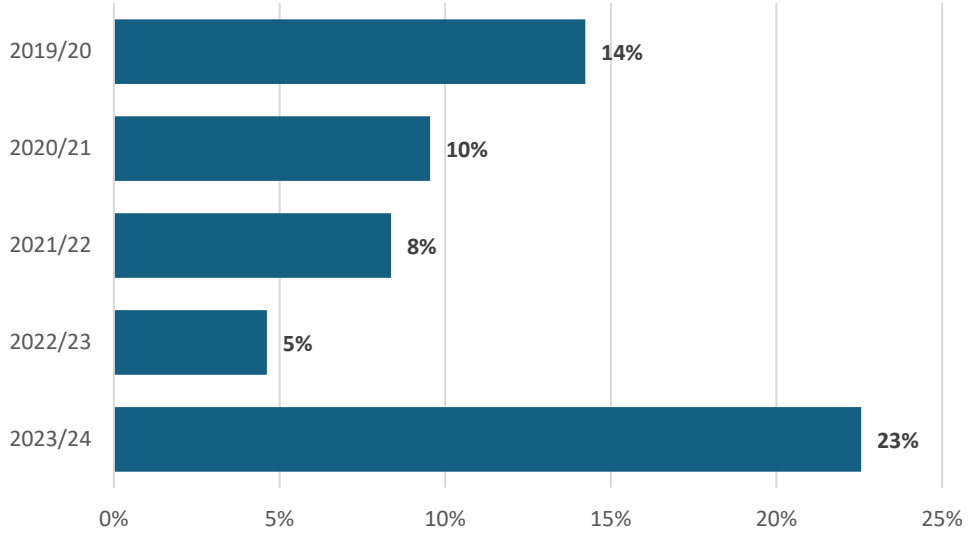
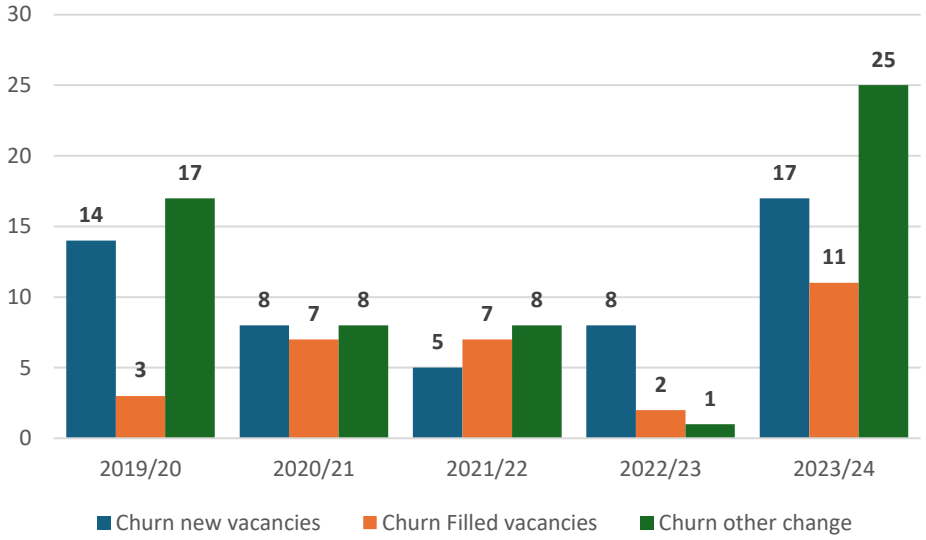


Chart 5: Level of Business Churn 2019-2024



The level of churn seen in Ludlow town centre in 2024 was considerable, with approaching a quarter of all commercial premises changing in some way. This is amongst the highest in Shropshire, and shows a reversal of the trend identified in 2023, when churn was amongst the lowest in Shropshire at just 5%. In previous years, churn was more aligned to the Shropshire average at 8% in 2021/22, 10% in 2020/21 and 14% in 2019/20.

Chart 6: Breakdown of Business Churn 2019-2024



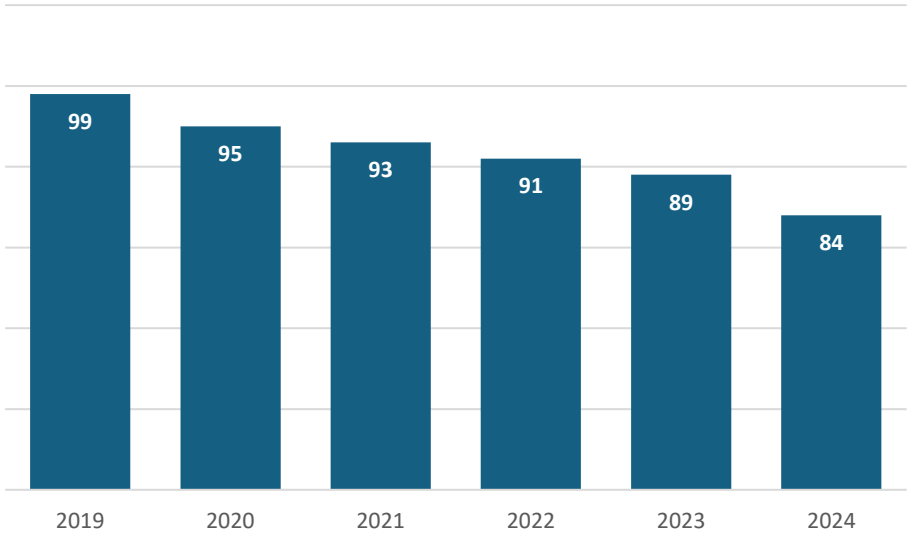
Change in 2024 was split across new vacancies arising, old vacancies becoming filled and other change such as change of purpose, ownership or branding. The latter accounted for almost half of churn (25 out of the 53 units that changed). There were 17 new vacancies compared with 11 previously vacant premises which had become filled. At least one premise that was vacant in 2023 was repurposed to residential property in 2024.

The number of vacancies arising has exceeded the number of occupations in previously vacant premises in every year since 2019 with the exception of 2021/22.

Comparison Retail

The largest proportion of commercial units and space is dedicated to the comparison retail category, accounting for 36% of units and 29% of gross floor space. This is the equivalent of 84 stores covering over 8,100m^2 of floor space. In comparison with other tier 2 towns in Shropshire, comparison retail is particularly important in Ludlow, especially in unit terms. This is due to a high presence of up-market boutiques, which are an important component of the tourism offer. The comparison retail offer has declined significantly in recent years, with 15 fewer operators in 2024 than there were in 2019. This is the equivalent of a 15% decrease. The number of stores in this classification fell by five in 2024, continuing the downward trend.

Chart 7: Number of Comparison Retail Outlets, 2019-2024



The range of different comparison good stores is wide, and there is a balance between independents and national chains. Ludlow is a location which attracts mid market and higher end chains due to its relatively affluent local population and its strong visitor economy.

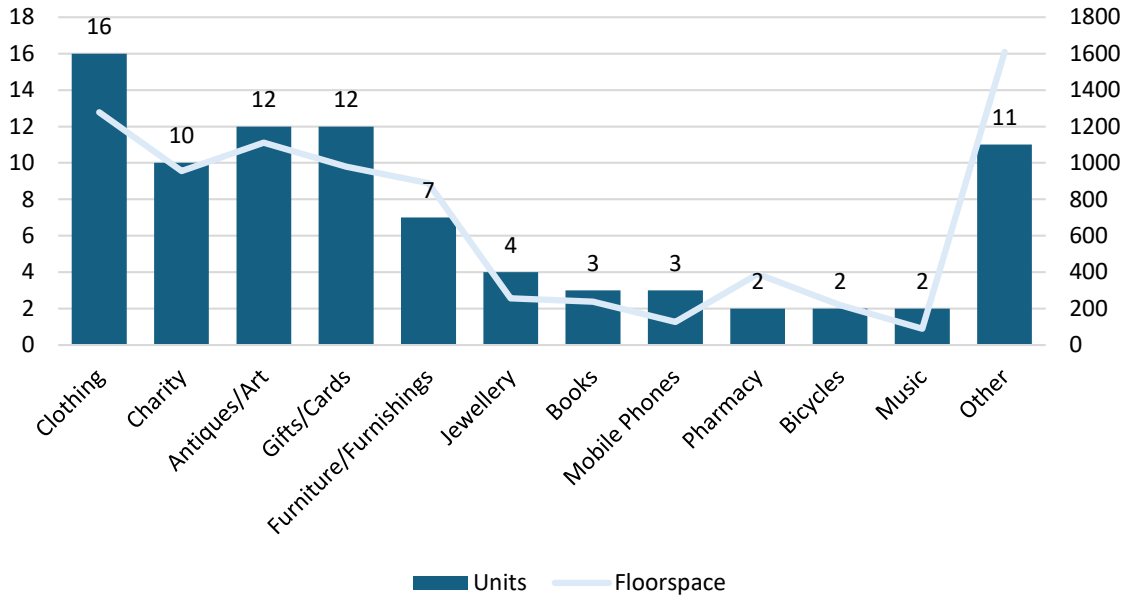
Within the town there are 16 clothes /shoe shops which is the equivalent of almost a fifth of all comparison units. The shops cater for men, women and children, and include small up-market boutiques as well as larger mass market outlets. Although most stores are independent, there are a number of chains, including Joules, White Stuff and Fat Face. Ludlow has more clothes shops than Oswestry, which is a significantly larger town. There was one fewer clothes shop in Ludlow in 2024 than there was in 2023 and two fewer than there were in 2022.

Around one in ten outlets is a charity store, with ten units trading. Most of these are national charities (Oxfam, Blue Cross, Cancer Research UK) but more local charities are also represented (Hope House, Severn Hospice). Three of the charity shops are on Bull Ring and two on King Street. The number of charity stores in Ludlow increased by one in 2023 but the only change in 2024 was the Severn Hospice shop relocating to a previously vacant premise.

Also very well represented in Ludlow are antiques shops and art galleries, of which there are 12. These account for 14% of all comparison units and comparison retail floor space. The presence of these stores adds to the town's tourism appeal. Two new antique stores opened in the town between the 2021 and 2022 audits but two closed in 2024. There are 12 shops selling gifts and/or cards which is an increase of two compared with 2023.

Seven stores sell home furnishings and furniture (including carpets). Four jewellery stores operate within the town as well as three book shops, three mobile phone stores and two pharmacies.

Chart 8: Breakdown of Comparison Retail by Type, 2024



Amongst the national chains represented in Ludlow (outside the clothing and charity sectors) are Boots, WH Smith and Timpson. Traditionally, there has been an absence of discounters within Ludlow's main shopping streets, but a new outlet of this type opened in Castle Street in 2024.

Convenience Retail

There are 19 convenience stores within the main shopping area of Ludlow with a combined floor space of around 5,300m^2. Convenience accounts for 19% of floor space against a share of just 8% of units, meaning that the average size of units in this classification is about twice the size of the overall average for businesses within Ludlow town centre. The reason for this is the presence of some large supermarkets within the principal shopping zone. The three supermarkets that are in the town account for almost 70% of convenience store floor space.

There are six fewer convenience outlets in Ludlow now than there were in 2019 with three closures taking place in 2023 and an additional one in 2024.

Map 5: Location of Ludlow's Main Convenience Stores

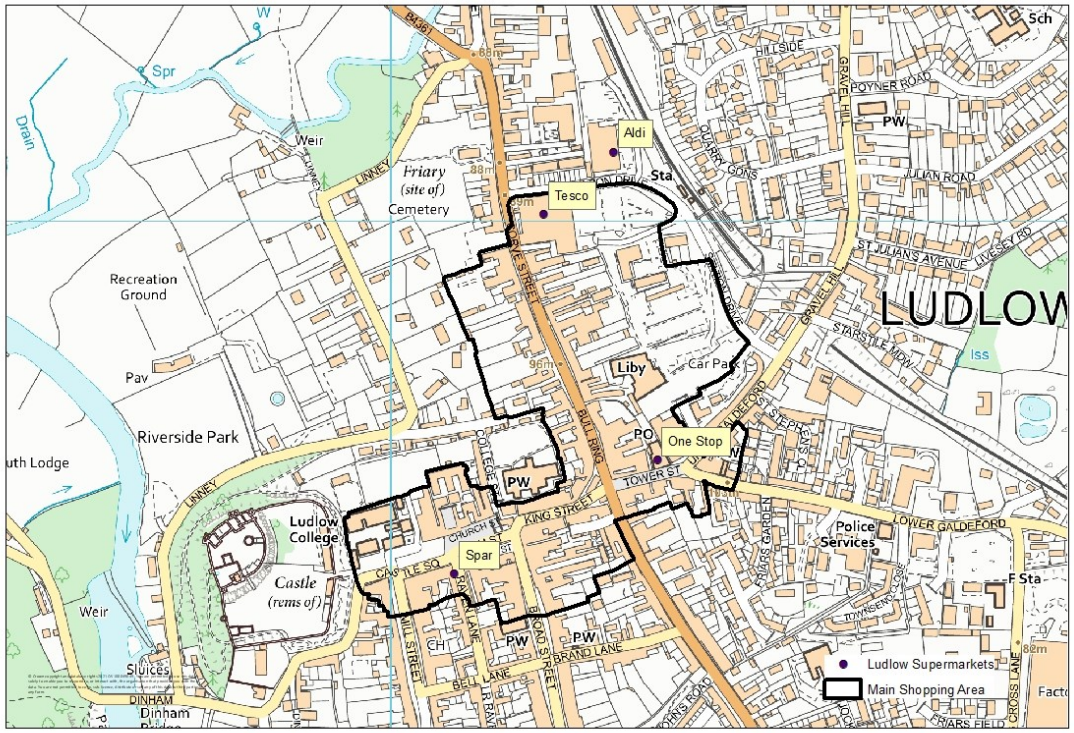
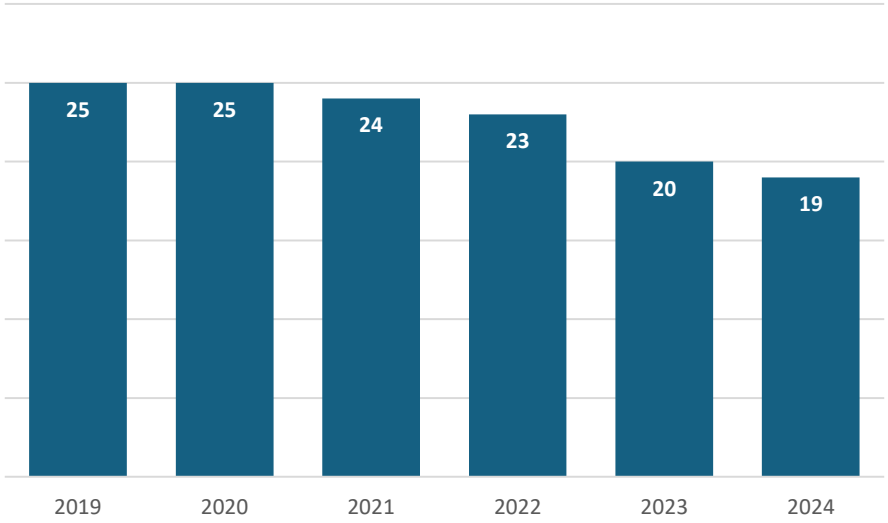


Chart 9: Number of Convenience Retail Outlets, 2019-2024



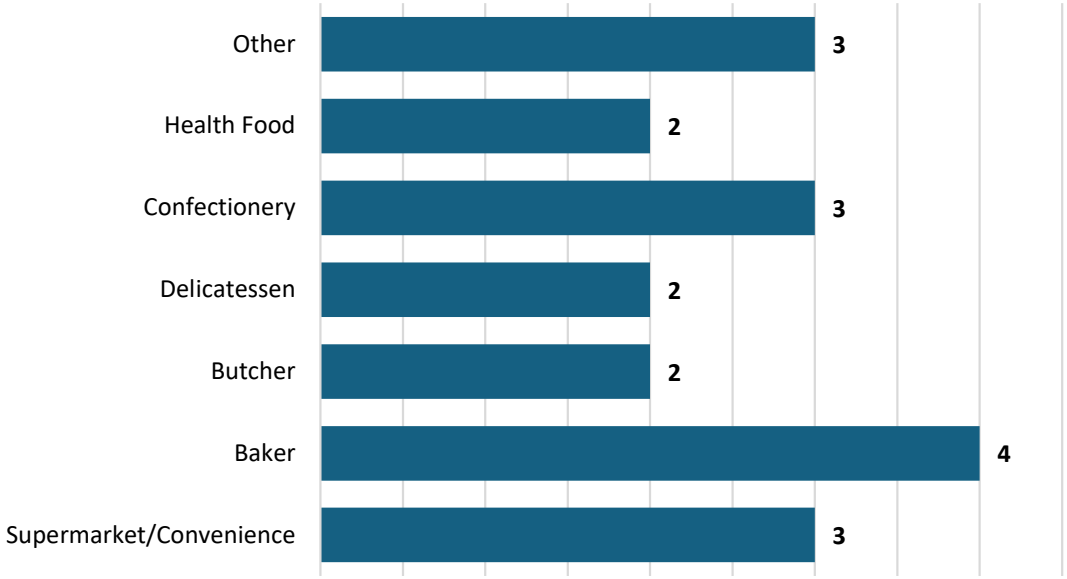
At the time of the audit, Tesco, Spar and One Stop Community Stores are in the survey boundary.

By way of contrast, the main supermarkets serving both Whitchurch and Market Drayton are outside the main shopping centres.

As shown in the adjacent map, Ludlow is also home to an Aldi but this is just outside the main shopping area.

As well as the main supermarkets, the town centre is also home to a number of specialist food stores, many of which are positioned at the premium end of the market. There are four bakeries, two butchers, three confectioners, two delicatessen, two health food stores, an off-licence, a fishmonger and a cheesemonger. Over the last year, a greengrocer and a farmers produce market have closed. A new bakery has opened, and the Ludlow branch of Greggs relocated. One confectionery store closed, but another opened, leaving no net change in the number of designated sweet shops in the town.

Chart 10: Number of Convenience Stores by Type, 2024



With the exception of the supermarkets, most operators in the convenience retail category are independent, although the chains Thorntons, Greggs and Holland & Barrett are present.

Restaurants & Takeaways

There are 28 restaurants and takeaways in Ludlow town centre, which is the equivalent of 12% of all commercial units. This category accounts for a slightly lower proportion of gross floor space (8%).

2020 was a difficult year for the hospitality industry given restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic with the number declining from 26 to 23. However, the sector appears to have recovered with the number of operators back up to pre-pandemic levels by 2023. Two additional operators began trading in 2024.

The number of units and floor space allocated to restaurants and takeaways is slightly lower in Ludlow than in other similar sized Shropshire towns. A number of the town's public houses as well as the main hotel also offer restaurant/café facilities.

Chart 11: Number of Restaurant/Takeaway Units, 2019-2024

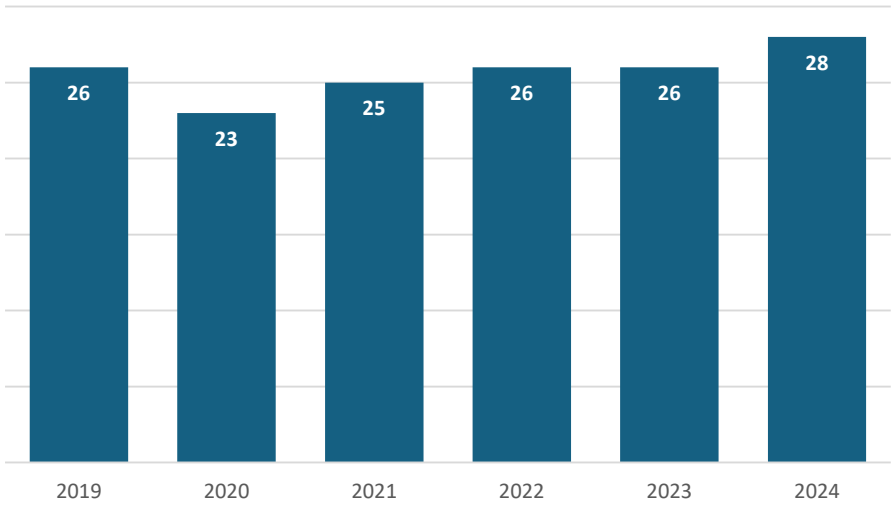
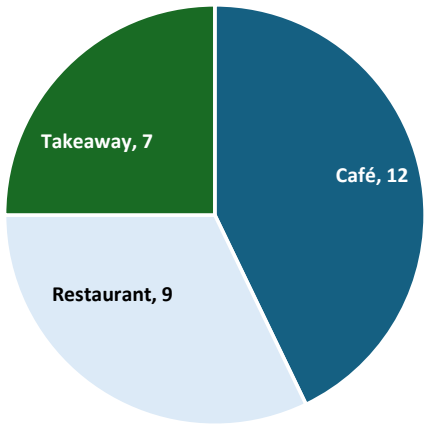


Chart 12: Breakdown of Restaurant/Takeaway Units by Type, 2024



The 28 units are split between cafés (43%), restaurants (32%) and takeaways (25%). Over the last year, the number of cafés rose by two, while there was no change in the number of restaurants or takeaways, although there was a small amount of churn.

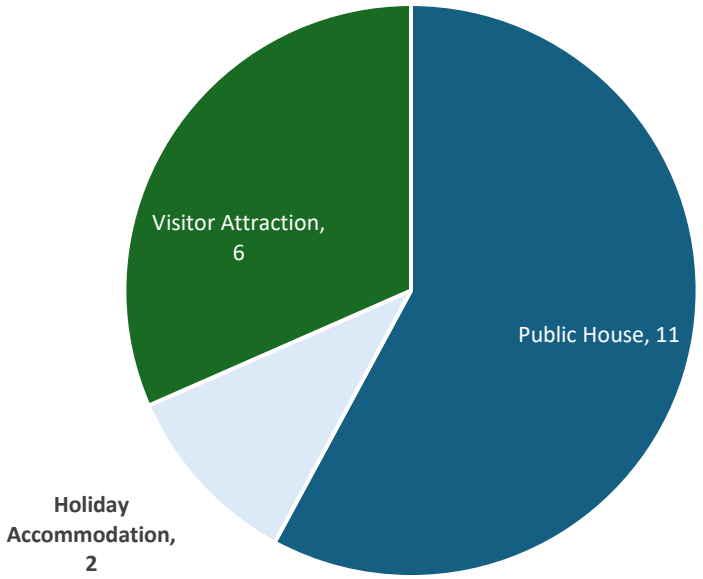
The range of cuisines on offer by Ludlow restaurants includes Thai, Chinese, Indian, Italian and modern British. In terms of takeaways, there is a range of Indian, Chinese, pizza, kebab and fish and chip outlets.

Most outlets in this category in Ludlow are independent; the free-standing branch of Costa Coffee closed in 2023 but there is a branch within the Tesco supermarket (not included within the numbers quoted above).

Tourism & Leisure

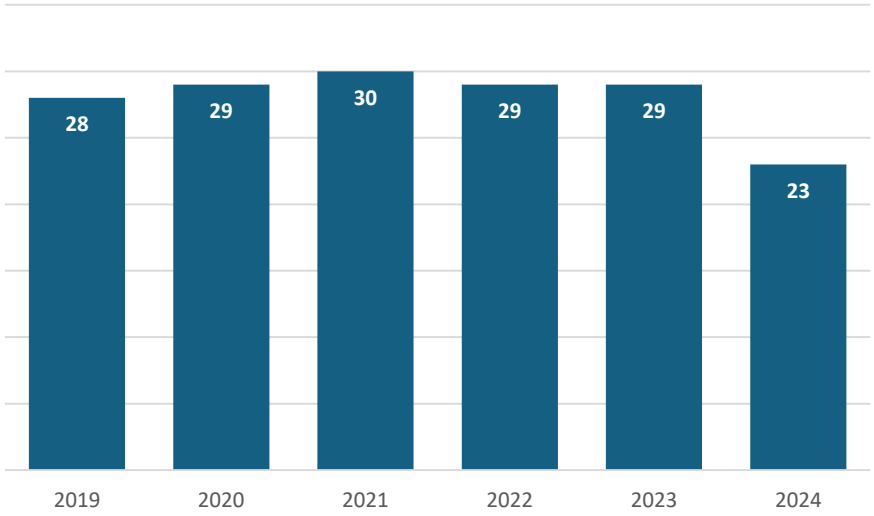
Also within the hospitality sector, there are 11 public houses and bars. These take up approximately 1,600m^2 gross floor space, the equivalent of 6% of all floor space in the town. One public house re-opened in 2022 and although there was no change in the number in 2024, some floor space was lost with one pub reducing in size. In addition, Ludlow accommodates a number of other tourism and leisure facilities, including an hotel and a B&B/guesthouse. Visitor accommodation capacity has reduced since 2020 with the closure of a B&B, although some of the public houses may also offer accommodation. There are six visitor attractions (Ludlow Museum, Ludlow Library & Museum Resource Centre and Ludlow Assembly Rooms plus three art galleries). The Castle, which is a major asset to the town, is just outside the main shopping boundary.

Chart 13: Ludlow Town Centre Tourism & Leisure Offer, 2024



Finance/Business Services

Chart 14: Number of Finance/Business Services Providers, 2019-2024



There are 23 providers of finance/business/professional services in Ludlow accounting for around 2,000m^2 of gross floor space. The sector represents 10% of all commercial units in Ludlow as well as 7% of floor space.

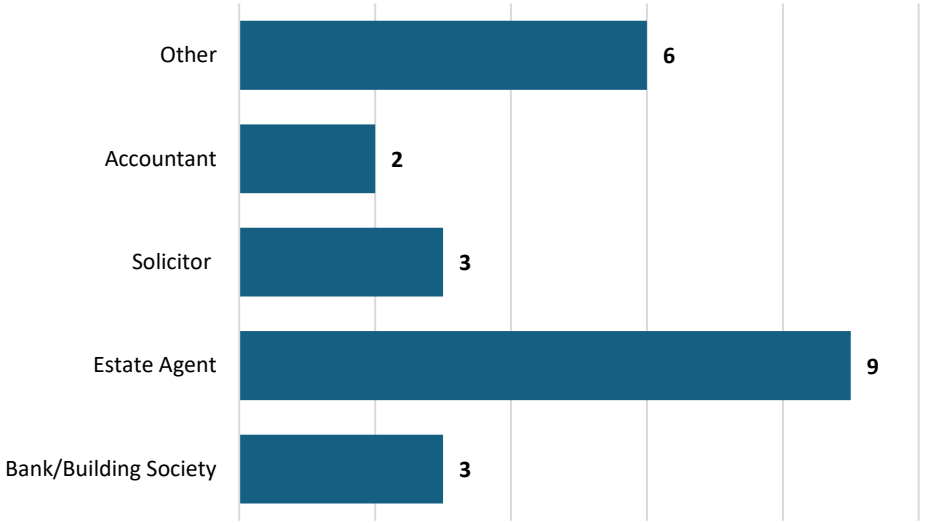
The number of operators in this sector has reduced by six (-21%) over the last year.

Within the finance and business services classification, there are three banks/building societies, including branches of Lloyds, Nat West and Nationwide. There are also nine estate agents, three solicitors and two accountants.

There is also an insurance broker, a computer services company, a financial adviser, a web designer, a property management company, an architect and a surveyor.

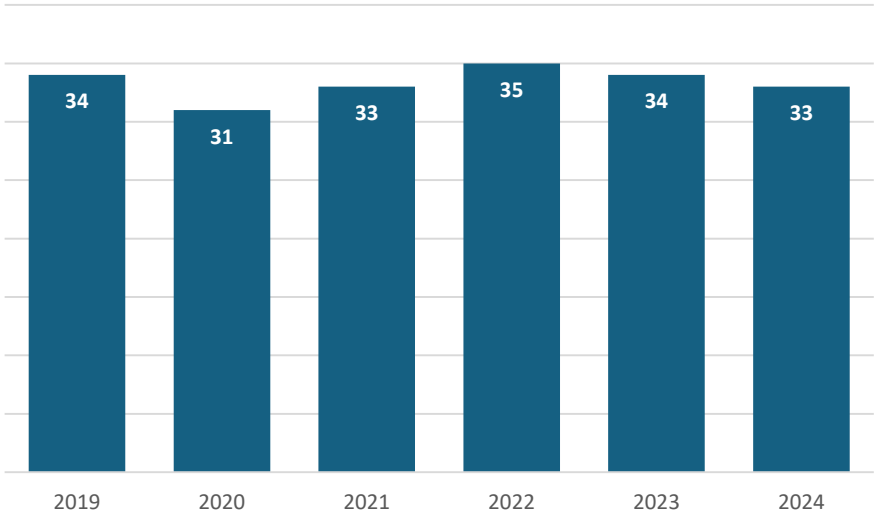
Between 2023 and 2024, a computer services business, an interior designer, a media agency and a recruitment consultant all closed.

Chart 15 : Number of Finance/Business Service Providers by Type, 2024



Retail Services

Chart 16: Number of Retail Services Providers, 2019-2024

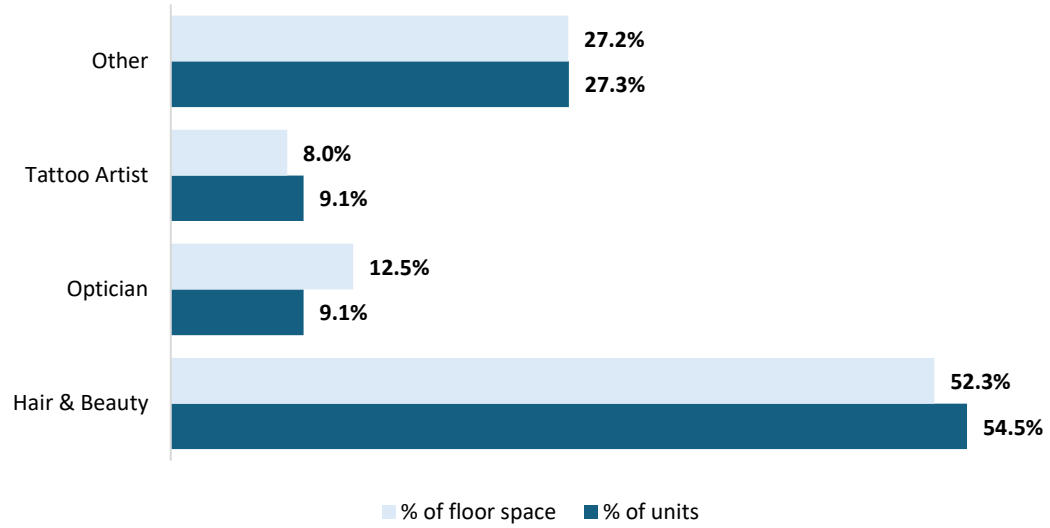


There are 33 retail service businesses operating in Ludlow town centre, with these accounting for just over 2,000m^2 of gross floor space. The number of retail services businesses in Ludlow reduced by three between 2019 and 2020, rose slightly in 2021 and 2022 before declining by one unit in 2023 and in 2024. Retail services businesses account for 14% of the commercial offer in Ludlow in unit terms and for 7% of floor space which is low in comparison with most other Shropshire towns.

Although the range of services provided is wide, a very high number of operators are in the barber and hair/beauty salon classification, with these together representing 52% of units and 55% of floor space. There are 12 hair dressers/beauty salons and six barbers.

In addition, there are three opticians (including the chains Specsavers and Vision Express) and three tattoo artists. A new Specsavers opened in 2023, and there were two branches of the chain in the town, but the original store had shut by the time of the 2024 audit. Other operators include a dry cleaner, a bookmaker, a travel agent, a key cutter and two photographers, one of which opened in 2024. Between the 2022 and 2023 audits, Coral bookmakers ceased trading in the town and in 2024, the town's funeral director relocated out of the town centre.

Chart 17: Breakdown of Retail Services by Type, 2024



Health

There are two health care practitioners located within the main shopping zone in Ludlow—a therapist and a nutrition club. Both businesses were new in 2024.

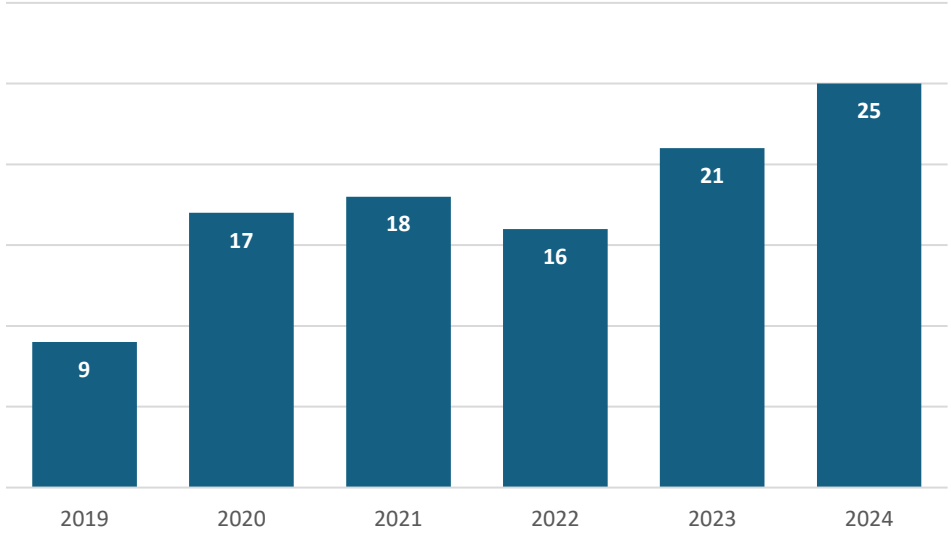
Vacant Units

At the time of the audit in 2024, there were 25 vacant units in Ludlow, which is 11% of all commercial outlets in the town. Vacancies therefore represent a lower share of all commercial space than the national average, which stood at 14.0% in the fourth quarter of 2023 according to BRC (data relating to high streets only). The vacancy rate is aligned to the Shropshire average (11%).

The units do, however, account for a disproportionately large share of floor space (13%) due to the presence of three large premises (the former Budgens supermarket and the former HSBC and Barclays banks).

While the vacancy rate is comparatively low, the number has increased significantly since the 2019 audit, when there were just nine empty units. Vacancies doubled in 2020 and then rose by a further one in 2021 before declining by two in 2022. The number rose again in 2023 with an additional five empty units recorded compared with 2022. Four more vacancies were recorded in 2024, leaving the vacancy rate higher than it has been at any point over the last six years.

Chart 18: Number of Vacant Premises, 2019-2024



There are eight vacant units on Bull Ring, three on Corve Street, two on King Street, Castle Street and Market Street and one each on Old Street, Tower Street, Mill Street, Fish Street, Broad Sheet, Buttercross, Lower Galdeford and Upper Galdeford.

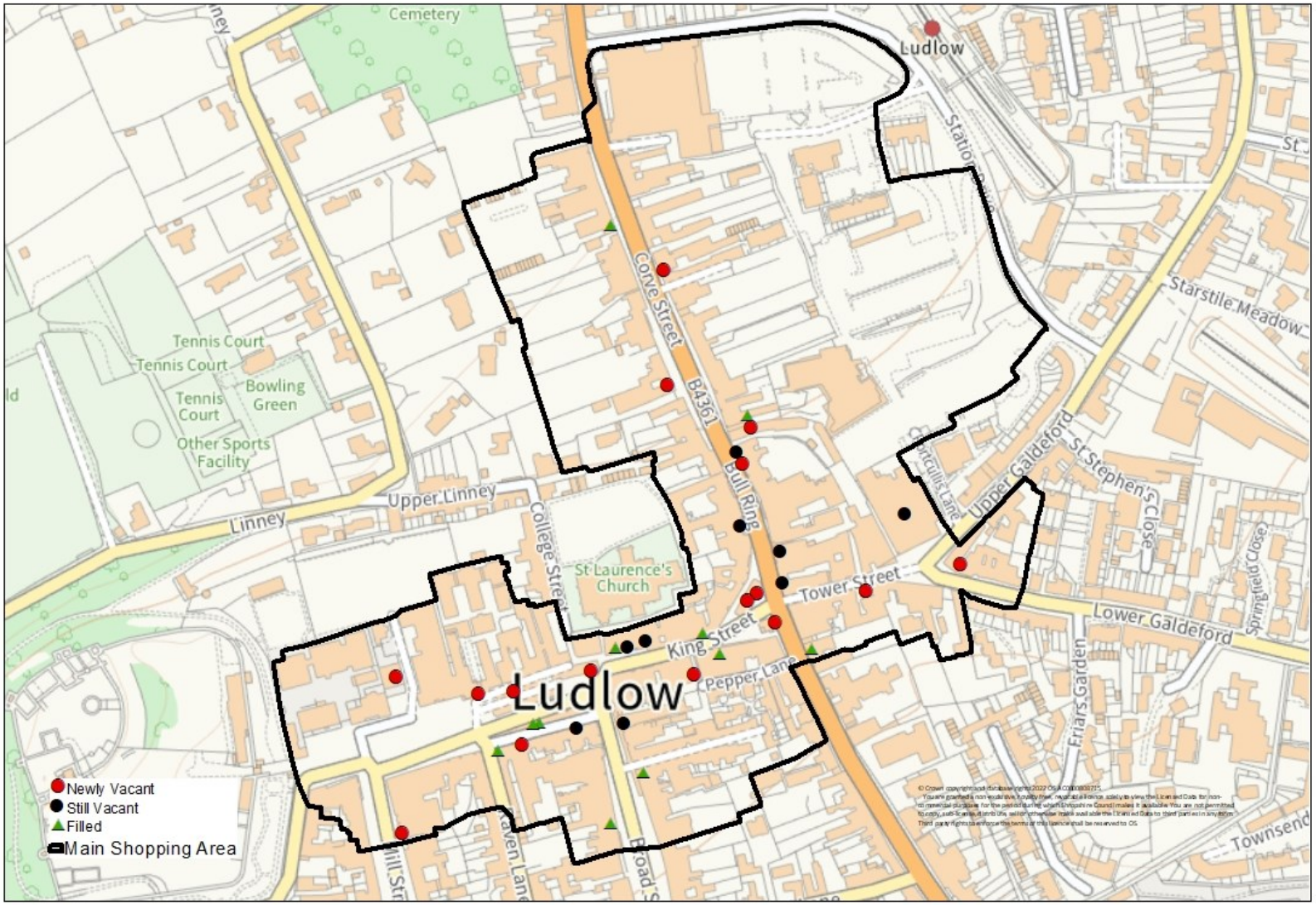
More than a two-thirds of all vacant units in Ludlow in 2024 had become unoccupied since the 2023 audit (17 units). A fifth of vacant premises have been empty since 2022 (five units), and there is one unit that has been vacant since at least 2019.

Map 6: Location of Vacant Commercial Premises, 2024



Of the 21 premises which were vacant in 2023, eight were still unoccupied in 2024, 11 had been filled and two were no longer classed as commercial premises. 17 new premises became vacant between the 2023 and 2024 audits, taking the total number of vacant units to 25.

Map 7: Change in 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, 401 residential premises are located within the scope of the audit, of which the majority are flats (278 or 69%). These are largely located above retail or other commercial outlets. There are 91 terraced houses in the area, which is the equivalent of more than a fifth of all housing stock in the town centre. There are clusters of terraced housing, in particular around Corve Street. Semi-detached and detached premises each account for 2-3% of town centre housing stock.

There are also 14 houses offering sheltered accommodation; these are in College Street.

Map 8: Location of Residential Premises in Ludlow Town Centre

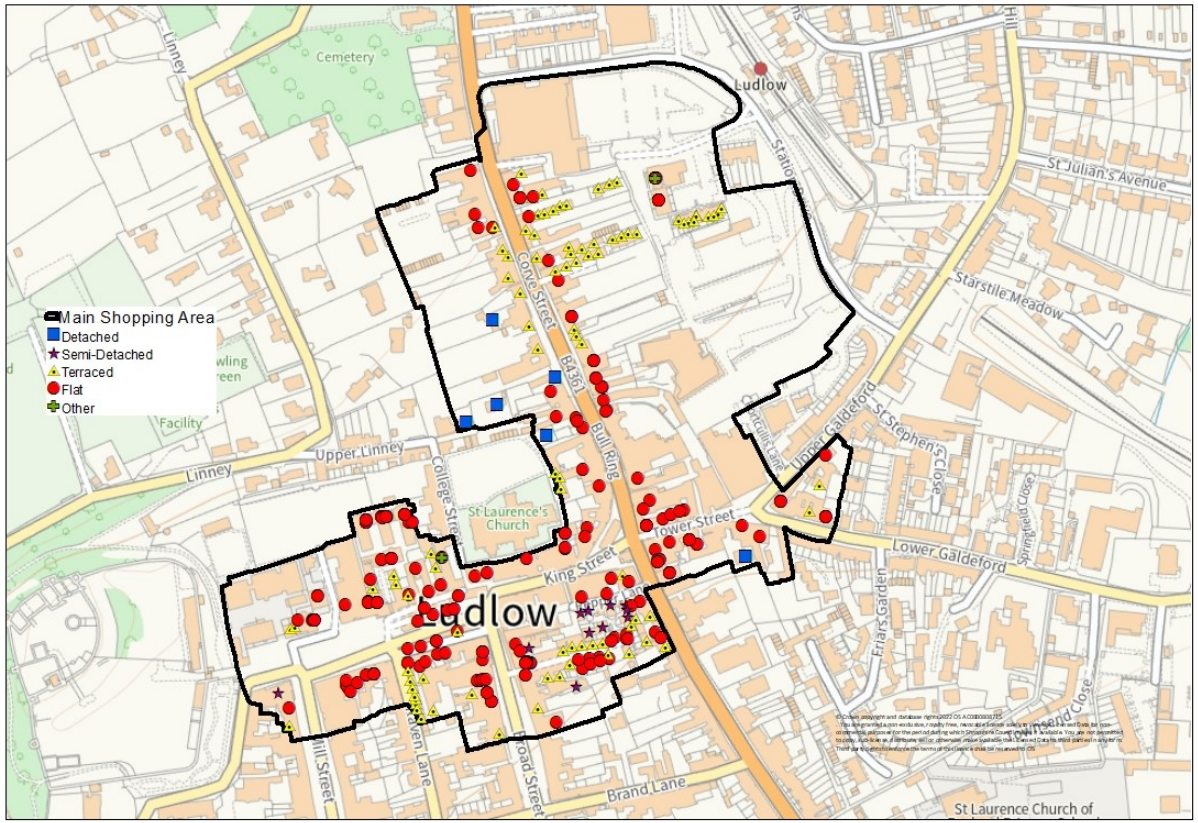


Chart 19: Breakdown of Residential Properties by Type

