Shropshire Council

Shropshire: Town Centre Audit Key Findings September 2025

Research undertaken by Business & Intelligence in conjunction with the Place Plan Officer Team

Published June 2026

Shropshire Council

Introduction

Shropshire Council undertakes an annual survey of town centre businesses to assess:

- 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 amount of business churn
- 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
- Change over time and the identification of emerging trends

The research also helps to monitor how towns adapt, and how quickly, to prevailing socio-economic circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

The following towns are part of the survey:

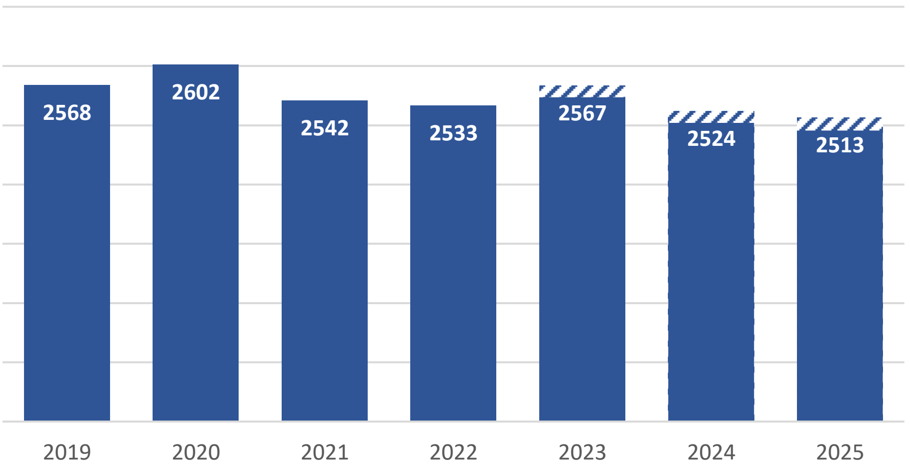
- Albrighton
- Bishop’s Castle
- Bridgnorth
- Broseley
- Church Stretton
- Cleobury Mortimer
- Craven Arms
- Ellesmere
- Highley
- Ludlow
- Market Drayton
- Much Wenlock
- Oswestry
- Shifnal
- Shrewsbury
- Wem
- Whitchuch

The research was first undertaken in 2019 and has been repeated in September every year since. In 2020 the audit took place 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). By September 2021, all pandemic restrictions had been lifted. By 2022, the cost-of-living crisis was gathering pace and in 2023 the rate of inflation was still elevated. Inflation had reduced by 2024, but consumer confidence remained low in both 2024 and 2025.

Key Results – Number of Commercial Outlets

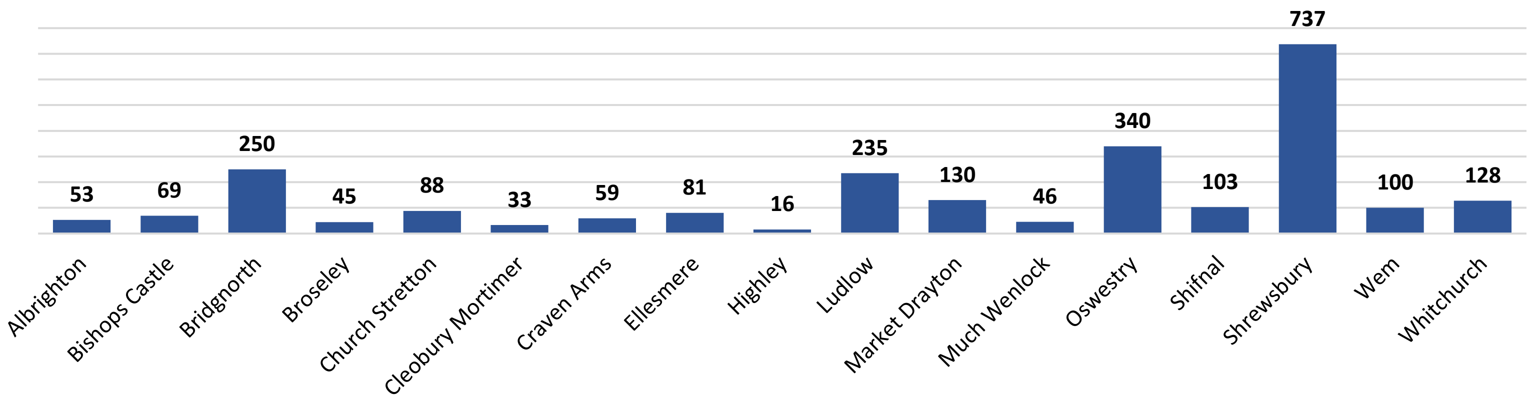
- There were 2,513 commercial premises in Shropshire's town centres in 2025. This includes 22 units in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that were not included as part of the survey area prior to 2023.
- There has been a reduction in the number of premises classed as commercial since 2020 (89 fewer or a reduction of 3.4%) - this is primarily due to the closure of the Pride Hill Shopping Centre in 2021 and the Riverside Centre in 2024, which has reduced commercial capacity in Shrewsbury.
- Across the county, some formerly commercial premises are now residential which has also impacted commercial supply.
- There has been a trend for larger units to be split into more than one premise which impacts the number of traders but not gross commercial floor space.
- Despite the contraction in commercial space in Shrewsbury, almost 30% of all outlets are in the county town. Oswestry is the second largest centre, with a 14% share.
- Accounting for almost one in ten outlets are Ludlow and Bridgnorth.

Number of Commercial Premises 2019-2025



Shaded area represents 22 units in new survey area in Castle Foregate, Shrewsbury

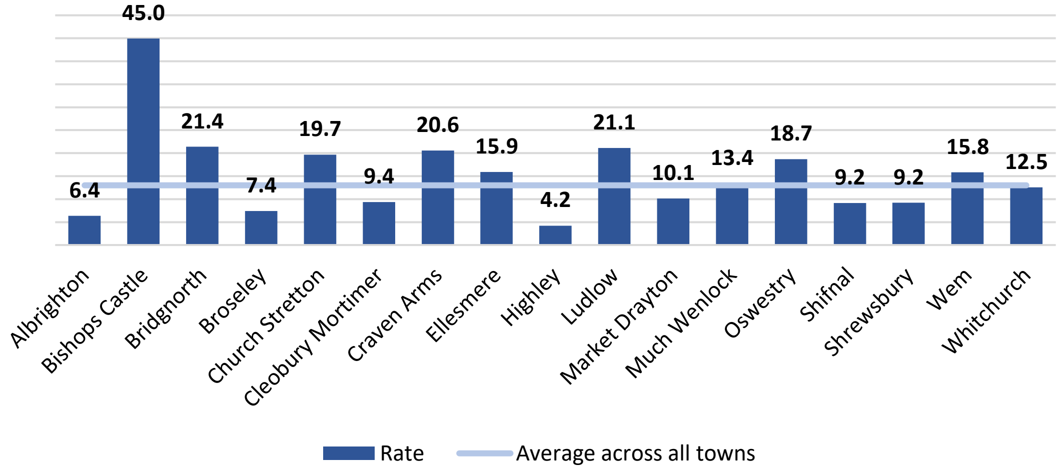
Number of Commercial Outlets by Town, 2025



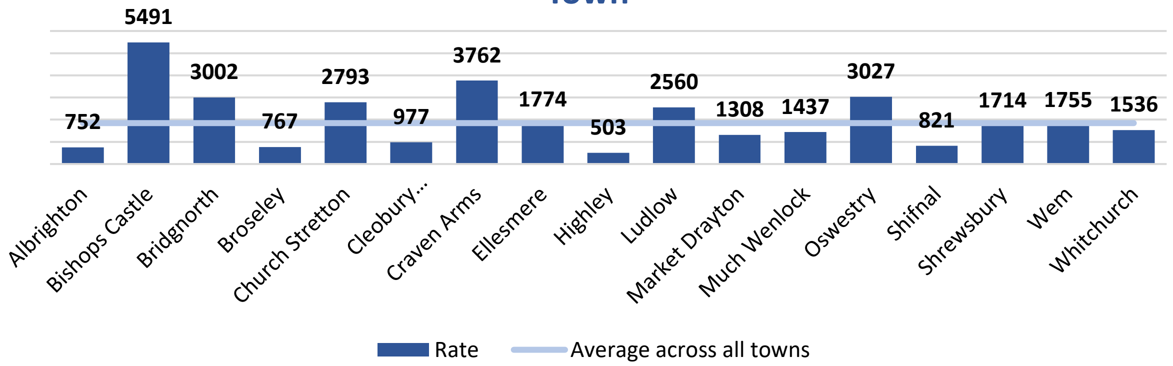
- Highley has the smallest shopping zone, with Broseley, Much Wenlock and Cleobury Mortimer also supporting fewer than 50 commercial outlets.

Key Results – Commercial Units/Space per Head of Population

Number of Commercial Outlets per 1,000 Population by Town



Commercial Floor Space (gross m^2) per 1,000 Population by Town

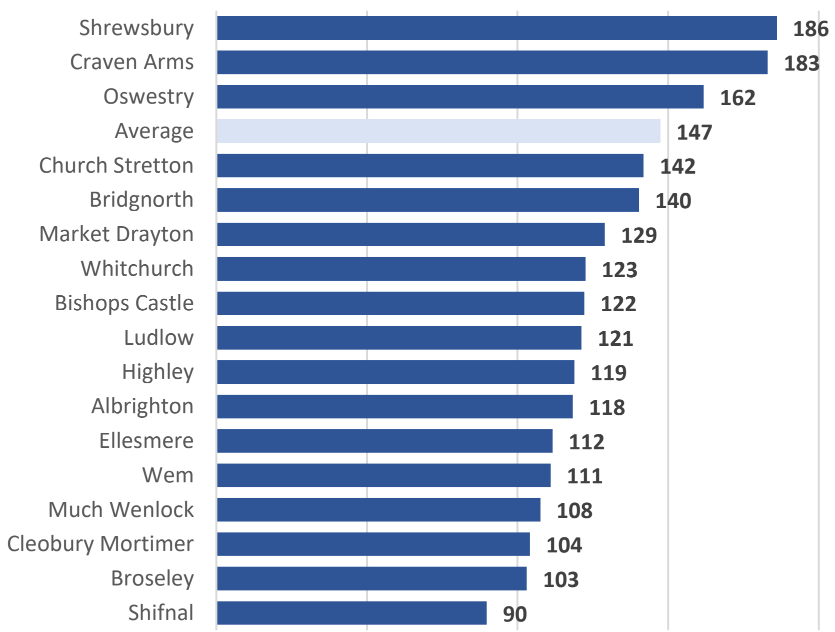


- On average in 2025, there were 13.0 commercial outlets per 1,000 population.
- Bishop’s Castle has the highest number of commercial outlets per head of population – more than twice as many as any other (reflecting its relative remoteness and significant hinterland).
- Highley has the fewest commercial outlets per head of population as well as the fewest commercial operators.
- Shrewsbury has a lower-than-average number of commercial outlets per head of population despite being the largest shopping destination. The county town does, however, have a significant number of commercial operators outside the town centre shopping zone and provides a critical mass of retailers with an extensive catchment area.
- Furthermore, the average store size in Shrewsbury is larger than average, meaning that commercial floor space per head of population is much closer to the average for Shropshire.

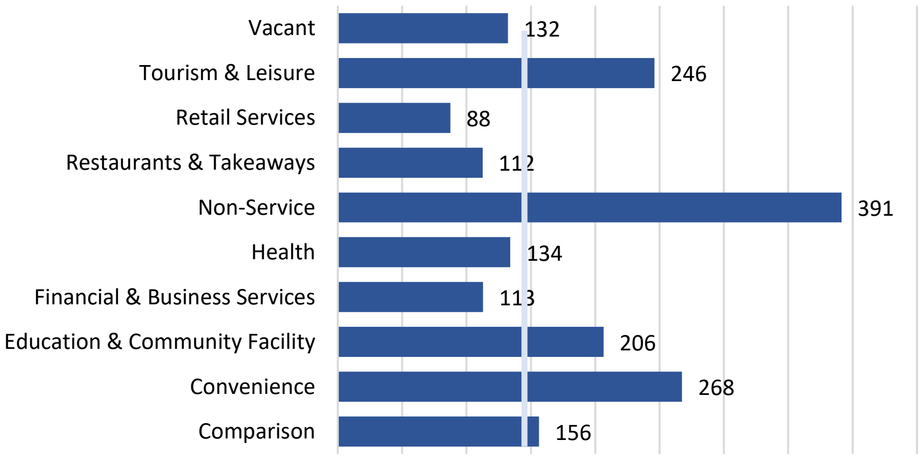
Key Results – Average Store Size

- The average gross store size across the Shropshire towns is 147m^2. This varies considerably by town.
- The largest average store size are in Shrewsbury (185m^2 on average) and Craven Arms (183m^2), with the Craven Arms average being driven up primarily due to one very large unit (Harry Tuffins).
- Units in Church Stretton and Bridgnorth are closest to the Shropshire average.
- Meanwhile, the average size in Shifnal is smallest at less than 100m^2.

Average Store Size by Town, 2025



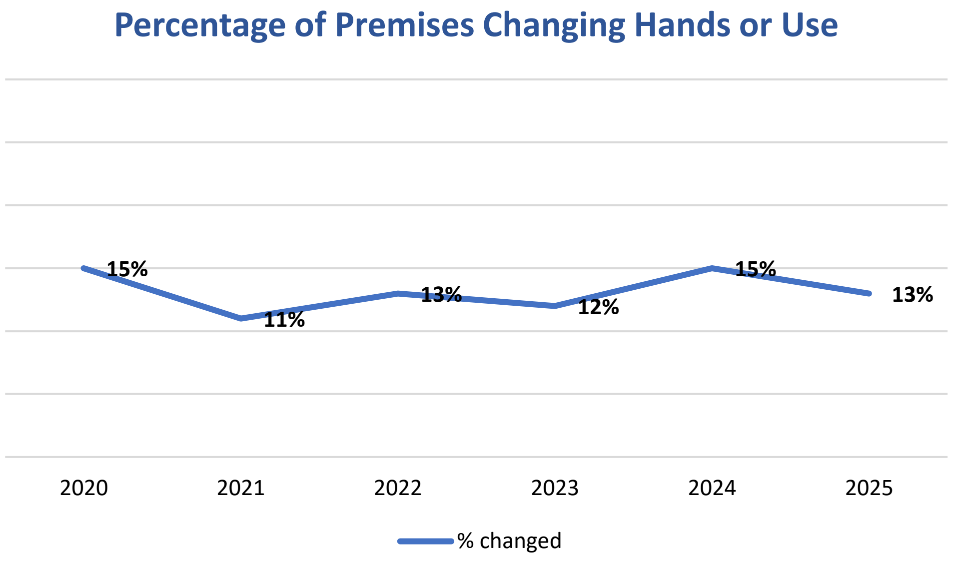
Average Store Size by Activity 2025

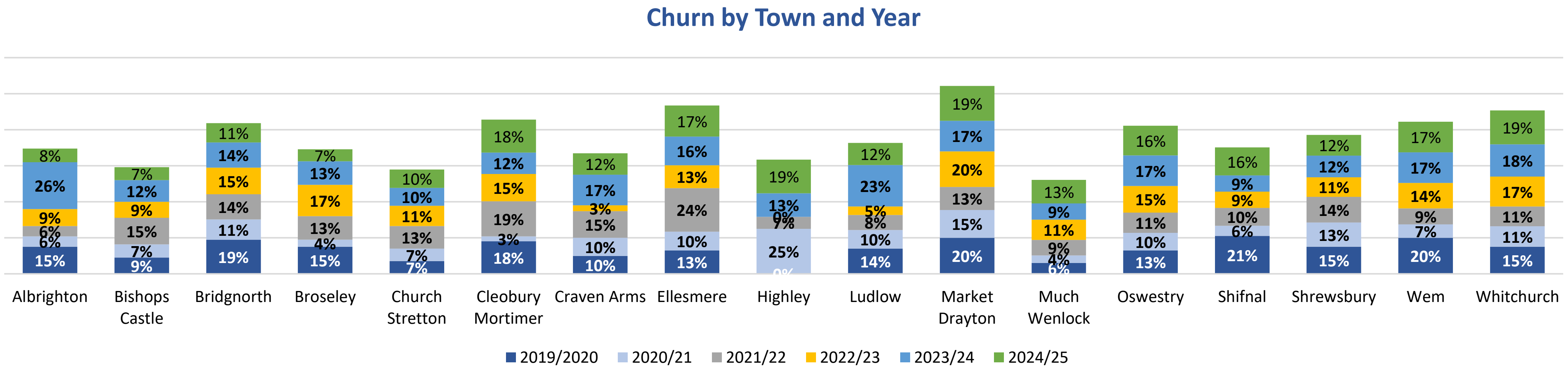


- The size of store also varies depending on commercial activity. Tourism & leisure, education & community facilities and convenience retail are significantly larger than average, while retail services, restaurants & takeaways and finance and business service providers typically occupy much smaller premises.

Key Results – Churn

- 336 commercial units changed hands or use (or were rebranded) between 2024 and 2025, which was the equivalent of a churn rate of 13%.
- This rate compares with 15% in 2024, 12% in 2023, 13% in 2022, 11% in 2021 and 15% in 2020.
- Since 2019, there have been 1,991 recorded use changes across stores in the main Shropshire towns, although it should be noted that some stores may have changed multiple times.
- 2025 churn was highest in Whitchurch, Market Drayton, Cleobury Mortimer, Highley, Ellesmere and Wem and lowest in Albrighton, Bishop's Castle and Broseley (all 10% or less).
- In smaller towns, churn rates vary significantly year on year. In larger centres, annual churn tends to be more consistent.
- The chart below shows levels of churn over the last five years. Since 2019, churn has been highest in Market Drayton, Ellesmere, Bridgnorth and Whitchurch. *(Please note, some business will have changed more than once over the time period.)*

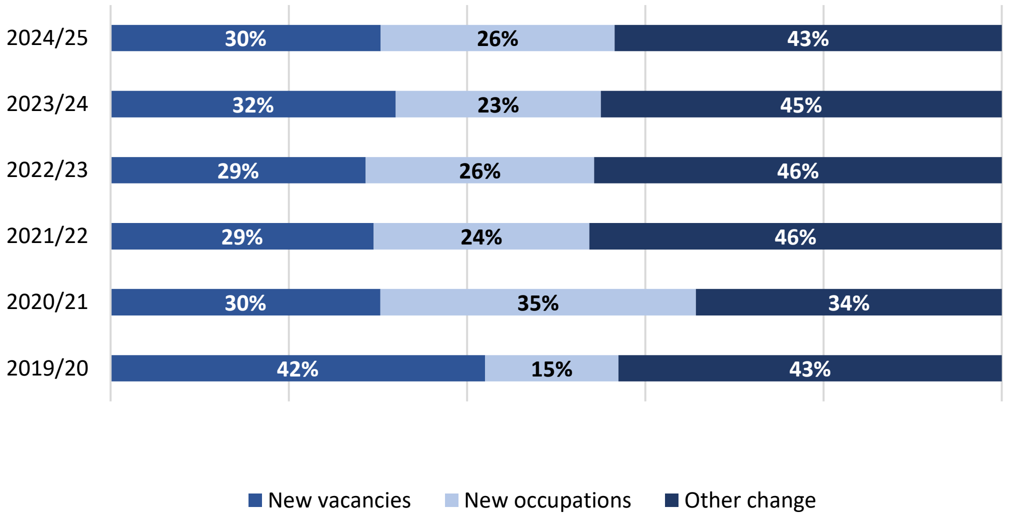




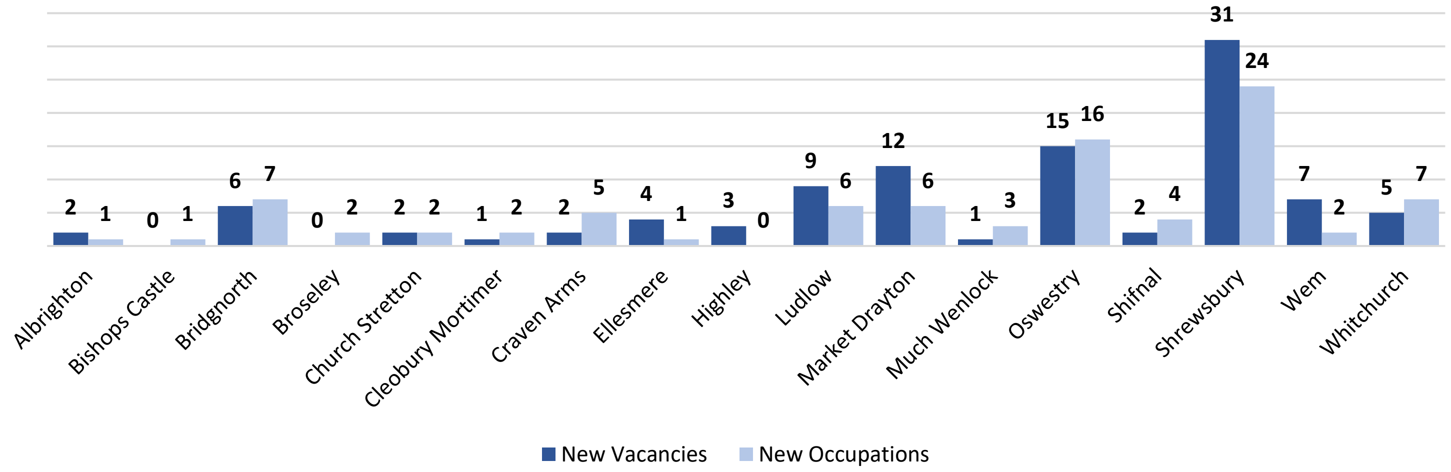
Key Results – Churn by Type of Change

- In 2025 30% of all change across Shropshire were premises becoming vacant, with 26% of previously vacant premises becoming filled.
- The proportion of change attributable to new vacancies has ranged between 29% and 32% since 2020/21, notably lower than the 42% recorded in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- In most towns, the number of new vacancies arising in 2025 exceeded the number of previously unoccupied premises becoming filled, leading to a net increase in the number of vacant premises. The differential was particularly in evidence in Shrewsbury, Ludlow, Market Drayton, Wem, Ellesmere and Highley. In contrast, the number of new vacancies was lower than the number of occupations in Bishop's Castle, Bridgnorth, Cleobury Mortimer, Craven Arms, Much Wenlock, Oswestry, Shifnal and Whitchurch.

Breakdown of Premise Use Change



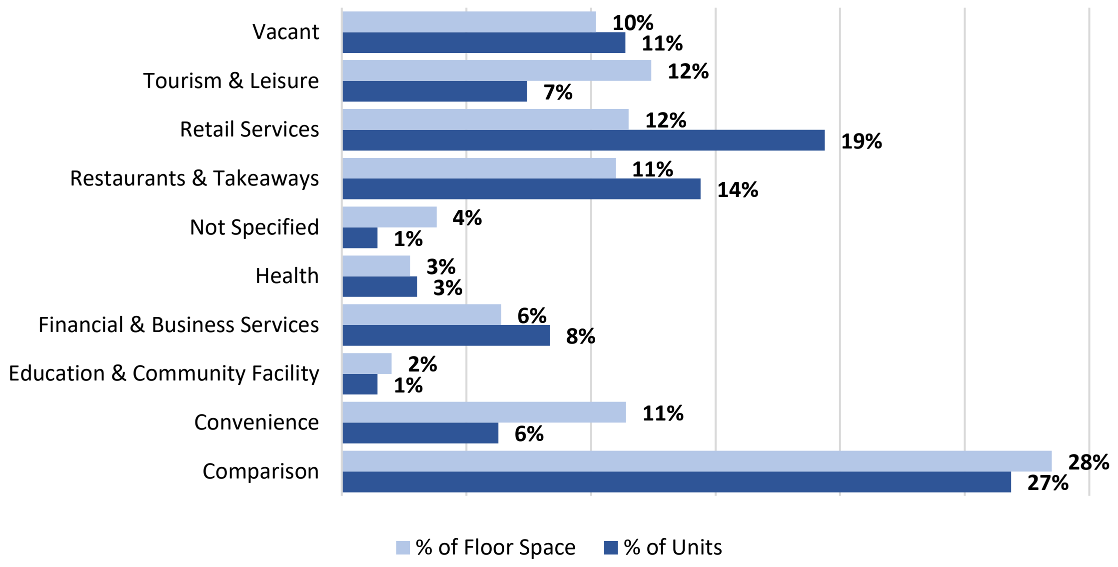
New Vacances vs New Occupations by Town, 2025



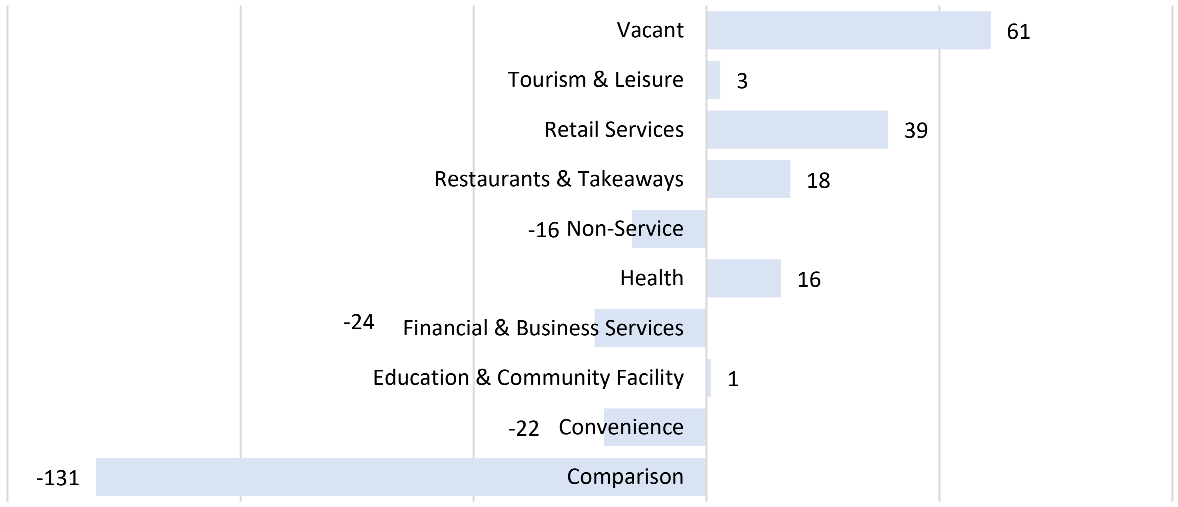
Key Results – Commercial Activity by Sector

- The comparison retail sector was particularly impacted by lower levels of activity on the high street during the pandemic and has been less quick to recover. There were 131 fewer comparison stores operating in 2025 than there were in 2019. The classification nonetheless accounts for the highest share of commercial units and floor space at 27% and 28%, respectively.
- Other sectors, which were either classified as “essential” throughout the pandemic, or those where it is less easy to substitute an on-line alternative (retail services, which includes hairdressers for example) have been relatively unscathed. Retail services increased their share of units from 17% to 19% between 2019 and 2025 with a net increase of 39 stores during this time.

Breakdown by Classification, 2025



Change in the Number of Commercial Units by Type, 2019/25



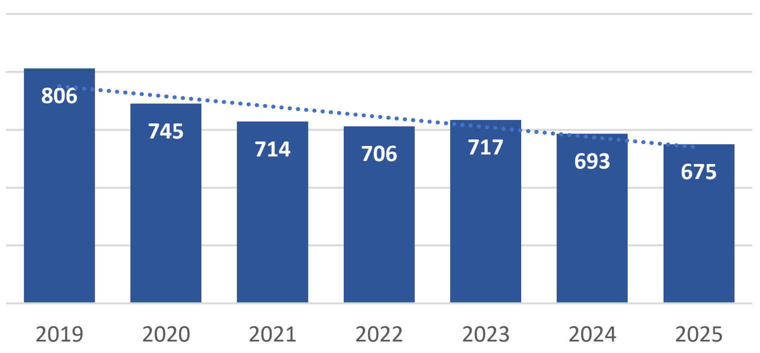
- The restaurant sector appears to have withstood lockdown relatively well, and there is evidence of new activity in this sector since 2021 with several new restaurants and cafes opening.
- The convenience sector has declined over the last few years, with 22 fewer operators.
- The finance and business services sector has also declined, with many towns losing bank branches and other professional services providers moving to out-of-town premises.
- Although the vacancy rate has been stable over the last couple of years, there are still significantly more vacant units than there were pre-pandemic.

Key Results – Comparison Retail

Comparison retail is defined as stores selling products that are not classified as food, drink and tobacco. Key sub–sectors include: clothing; homeware/household goods; antiques; pharmacies; hobbies/crafts, gifts, cards & stationery; mobile phones, computers & electricals; charity shops.

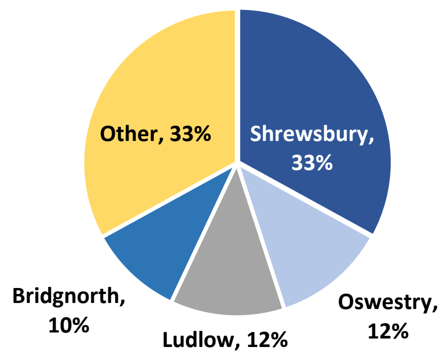
- Comparison retail was particularly impacted during the pandemic when it was categorised as “non-essential”. Between 2019 and 2022 the number of operators across the main Shropshire town centre shopping zones fell by 100 (12% decrease).
- The sector did recovery slightly in 2023 with an additional 11 stores operating. However, the number reduced again in 2024 and 2025 (by 42) and it will be difficult for high street retailers to regain market share lost to on-line platforms.
- Some towns have a much more extensive comparison offer than others – Shrewsbury accounts for a third of all comparison stores.
- Comparison accounts for 27% of all commercial units across Shropshire, but for a significantly higher proportion than this in Ludlow, Church Stretton, Whitchurch and Shrewsbury. Comparison retail is also over-represented in Much Wenlock and Bishop’s Castle.

Number of Comparison Retailers

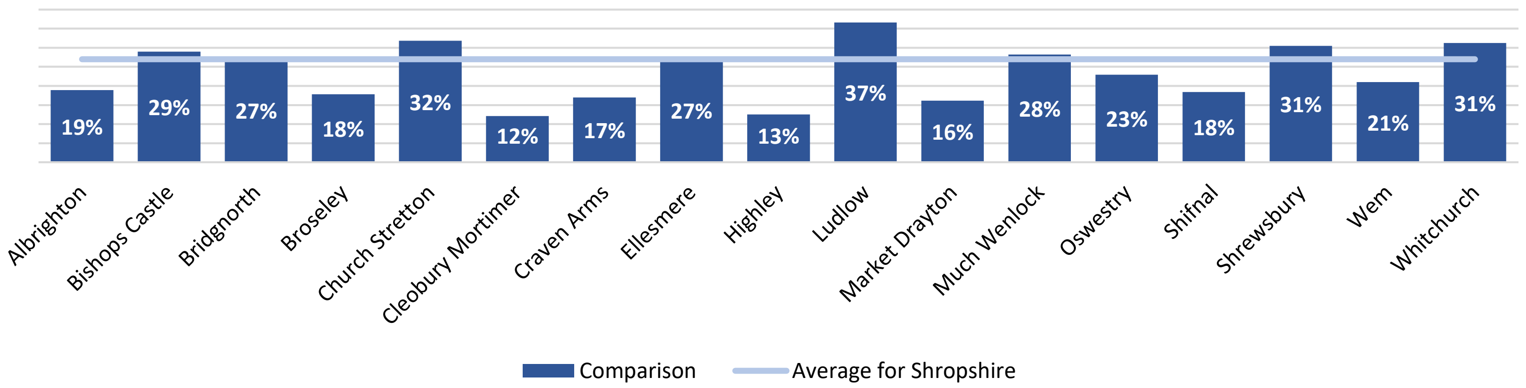


Data from 2023 onwards includes comparison stores located in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that was not included in the survey zone in previous years. This increased the total by one in 2023.

Breakdown of Comparison Retail by Town, 2025



Relative Importance of Comparison Retail by Town, 2025

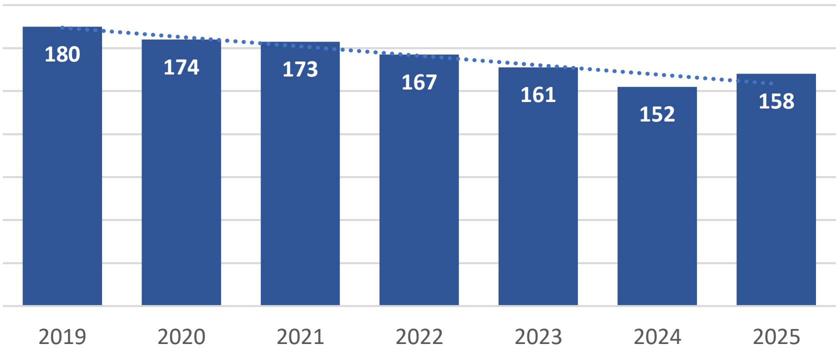


Key Results – Convenience Retail

Convenience retail is defined as stores selling predominantly food, drink and tobacco. Key sub–sectors include: supermarkets and general convenience stores; butchers; bakers; confectioners; delicatessen; health food; greengrocers; fishmongers; off-licenses; newsagents.

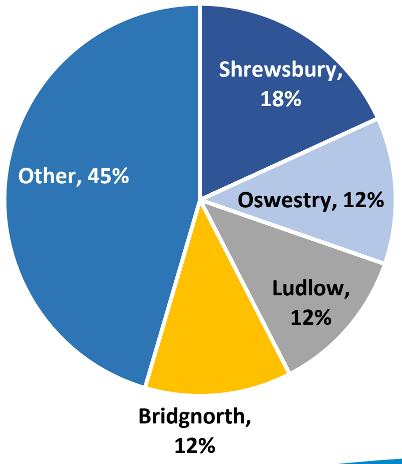
- Like the comparison sector, the convenience offer within town centres has declined since 2019, with a net loss of 22 units over the six-year period. The number fell in every year since 2019 until 2025 when there was a net increase of six stores.
- In part this decline can be attributable to the continued trend for main convenience retailers, especially supermarkets, to be located outside the main town centre shopping zones.
- Although 18% of the convenience retail offer is in Shrewsbury, the classification is of lesser importance than in any other town.
- Convenience retail is of particular significance in Highley, Broseley and Much Wenlock.
- The average size of convenience stores is large (due the presence of some supermarkets), with this classification accounting for 11% of floor space across Shropshire (6% of units).
- It should be noted that some towns benefit from indoor and outdoor markets which augment the convenience offer.

Number of Convenience Retailers

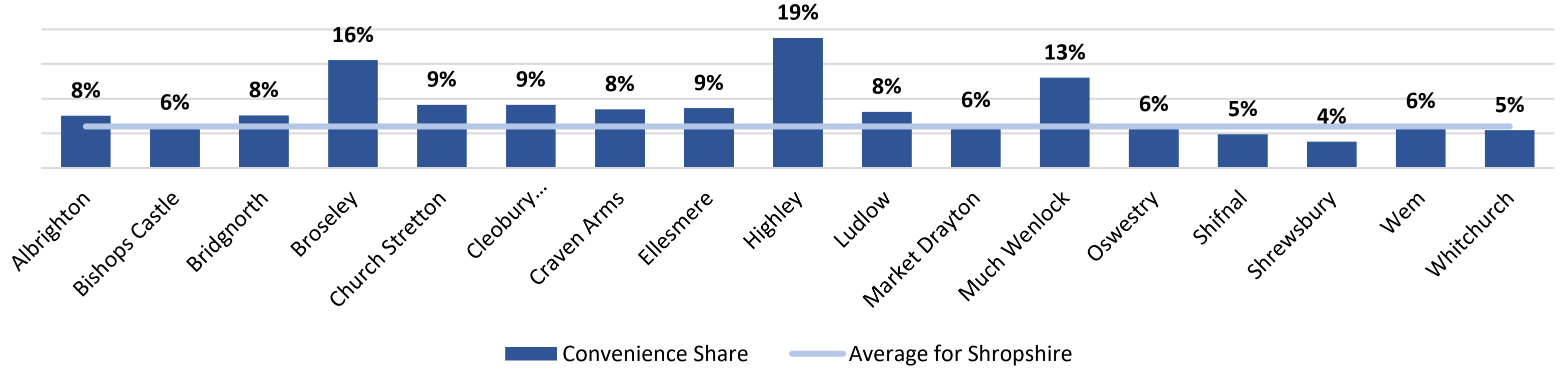


Data from 2023 onwards includes convenience stores located in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that was not included in the survey zone in previous years. This increased the total by one in 2023.

Convenience Retail: Shares of Total Units by Town, 2025



Relative Importance of Convenience Retail by Town, 2025

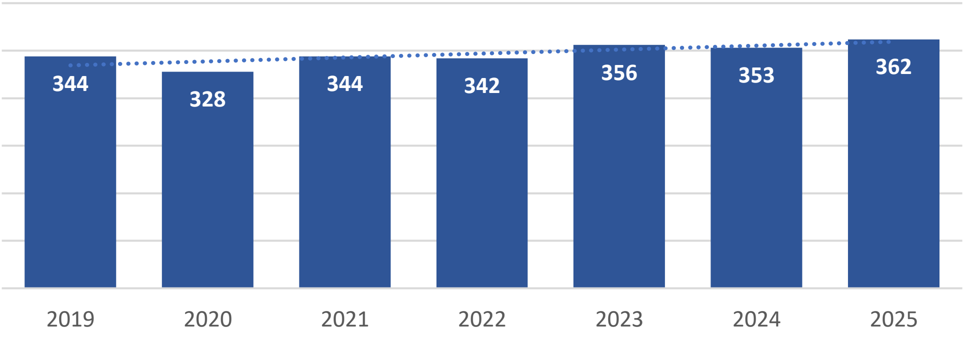


Key Results – Restaurants & Takeaways

The restaurant & takeaway classification includes restaurants, cafés, tea rooms, sandwich shops and takeaways.

- The sector was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when the number of units trading fell by 16 (a decrease of 5%).
- Subsequently, however, the sector has recovered, with slightly more operators than there were pre-pandemic (although eight of the nine additional traders are located in Castle Foregate in Shrewsbury which was only surveyed in 2023 and 2024).
- Shrewsbury accounts for over a third of all restaurants and takeaways, reflecting the town's significant night-time economy.
- Accounting for 14% of all commercial operators across Shropshire, restaurants and takeaways account for at least 7% of units in each town and have an above average representation in Albrighton, Broseley, Church Stretton, Cleobury Mortimer, Ellesmere, Shifnal and Whitchurch as well as Shrewsbury.

Number of Restaurants & Takeaways, 2025



Data from 2023 onwards includes restaurants and takeaways located in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that was not included in the survey zone in previous years. This increased the total by eight in 2023.

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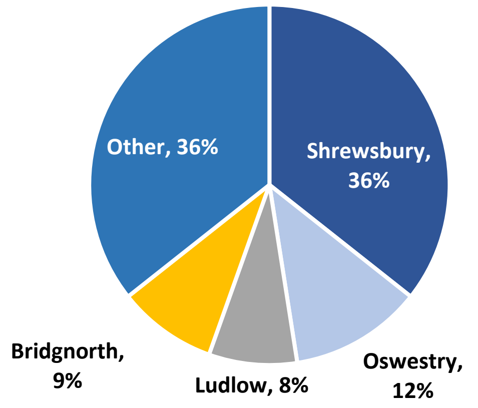
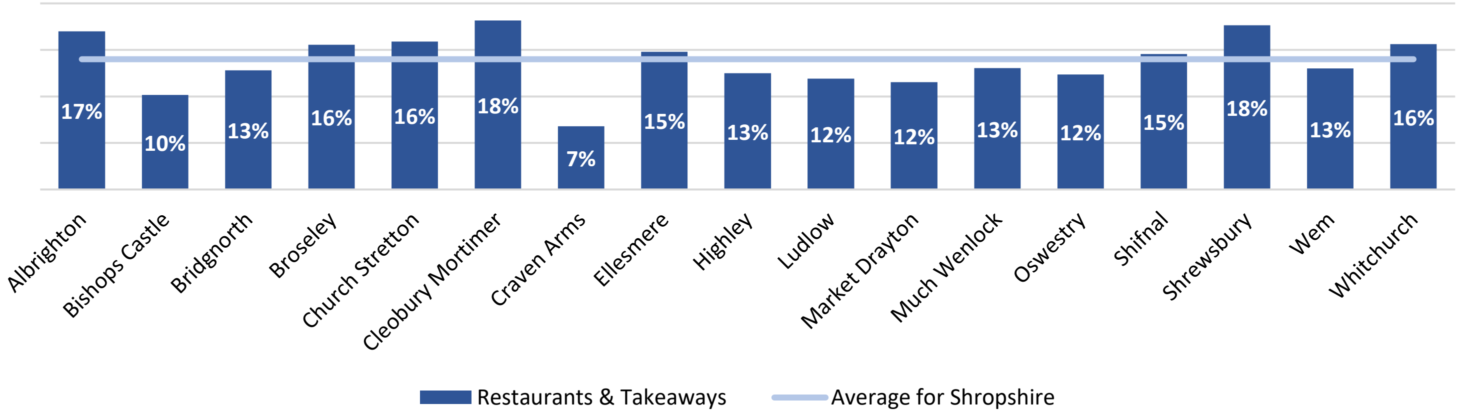
Restaurants/Takeaways: Shares of Total Units by Town, 2025



Relative Importance of Restaurants/Takeaways by Town, 2025



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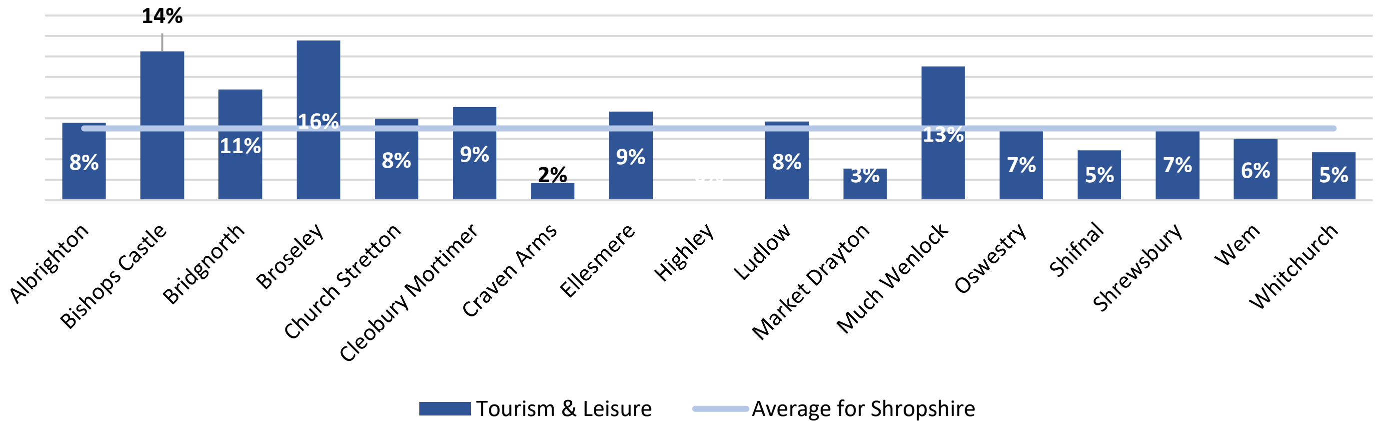
Key Results – Tourism & Leisure

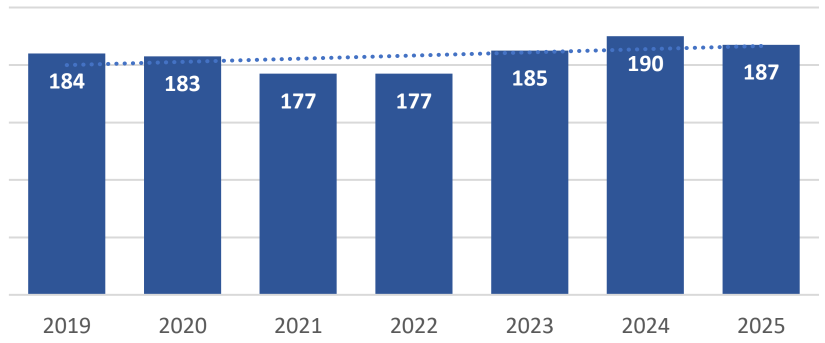
The tourism & leisure classification includes hotels and other holiday accommodation, public houses and bars as well as museums, entertainment venues, visitor attractions and cultural assets.

- The number of operators in the tourism & leisure classification fell by seven between 2019 and 2022 but the sector has since recovered somewhat, with 187 organisations trading in 2025 (including five within the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury which was not included in the Shrewsbury shopping zone until 2023).
- This classification accounts for 7% of units across the Shropshire towns, but as the average size is large, they represent 12% of commercial space.
- There are no operators in this classification Highley (in the shopping zone), and relatively few in Craven Arms, Market Drayton, Shifnal and Whitchurch.
- They command a particularly high share of units in Bishop's Castle, Bridgnorth, Broseley and Much Wenlock.

Relative Importance of Tourism & Leisure by Town, 2025

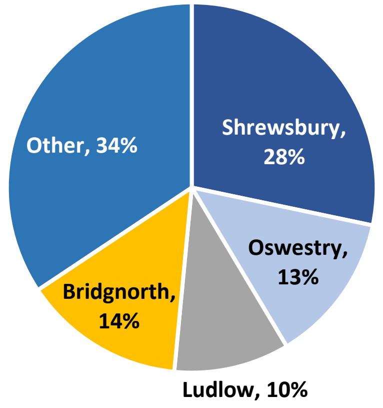


Number of Tourism & Leisure Operators



Data from 2023 onwards includes tourism & leisure operators located in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that was not included in the survey zone in previous years. This increased the total by five in 2023.

Tourism & Leisure: Shares of Total Units by Town, 2025

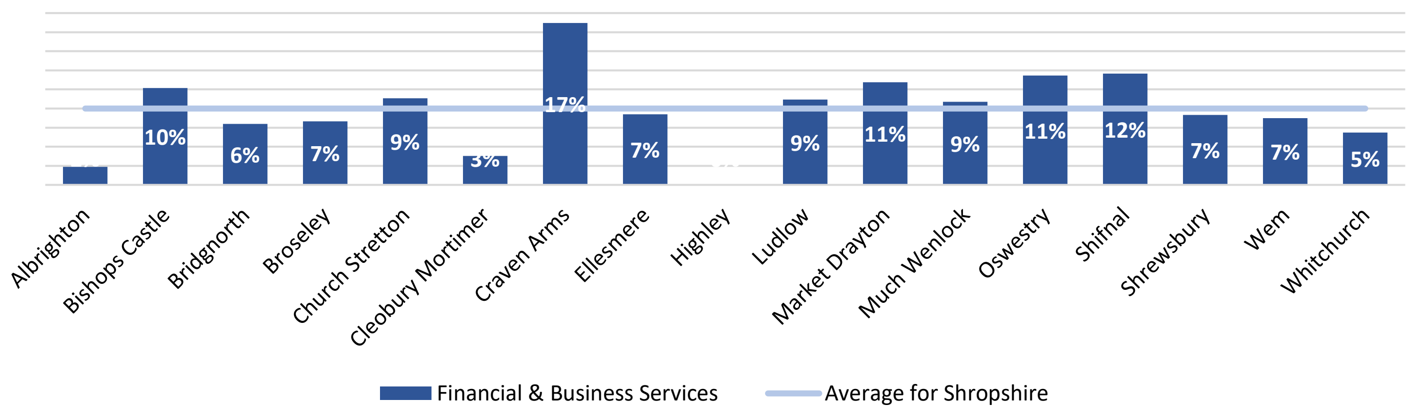


Key Results – Finance, Business & Professional Services

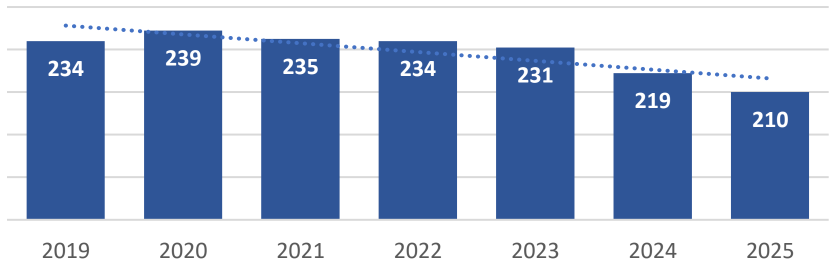
This classification includes a range of financial services providers including banks and building societies, mortgage brokers and financial advisors. It also include a range of professional services such as estate agents, solicitors, accountants and insurance brokers.

- The finance and business services classification has contracted slightly in recent years, with the number of operators falling to 210 by 2025.
- Since 2019, several bank branches have closed in Shropshire, and this has impacted the sector.
- The classification accounts for 8% of units and 6% of floor space across Shropshire and is particularly important in Craven Arms, Shifnal, Market Drayton and Oswestry.
- Although a quarter of operators are in Shrewsbury, this classification is of less importance to Shrewsbury than the Shropshire average, in part because many professional services providers are now located out of town on one of the surrounding business parks.

Relative Importance of Finance/Business Services by Town, 2025

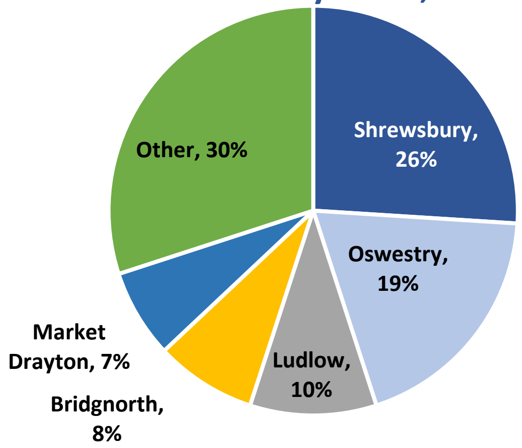


Number of Financial & Business Service Providers, 2025



Data from 2023 onwards includes finance, business and professional services providers located in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that was not included in the survey zone in previous years. This increased the total by three in 2023.

Finance/Business Services: Shares of Total Units by Town, 2025

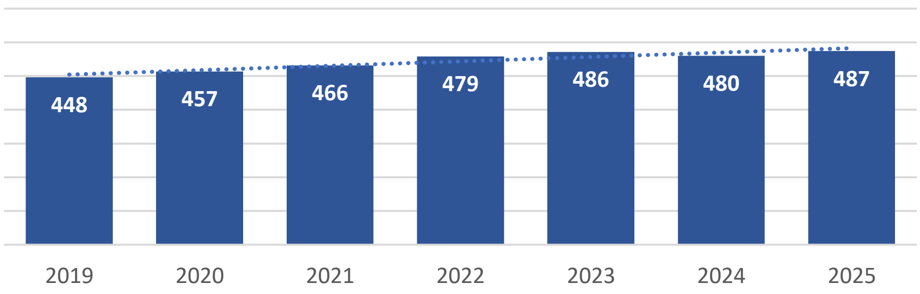


Key Results – Retail Services

Retail services are defined as businesses selling a service rather than a product, and include hairdressers, barbers and beauty salons, travel agents, opticians, funeral directors, bookmakers, tattooists, photographers and post offices.

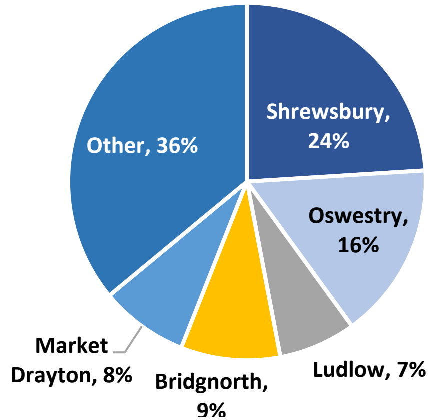
- Retail services have emerged from the pandemic relatively unscathed – although obliged to close during lockdowns, they have bounced back quickly, in no small part because they offer a service that it is mostly impossible to obtain on-line.
- Between 2019 and 2025, an additional 39 businesses in this classification began to trade (including four in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury which was first audited in 2023), which is the equivalent of a 9% rise.
- Retail services account for an average of 19% of units across Shropshire. Premises tend to be smaller than average; hence, this classification accounts for 11% of gross floor space.
- The relative importance of retail services varies considerably from town to town, accounting for least a quarter of units in Albrighton, Cleobury Mortimer, Highley, Market Drayton, Shifnal and Wem. In contrast, they account for 15% or less in Church Stretton, Bishop's Castle, Ludlow and Much Wenlock.

Number of Retail Services Operators, 2025

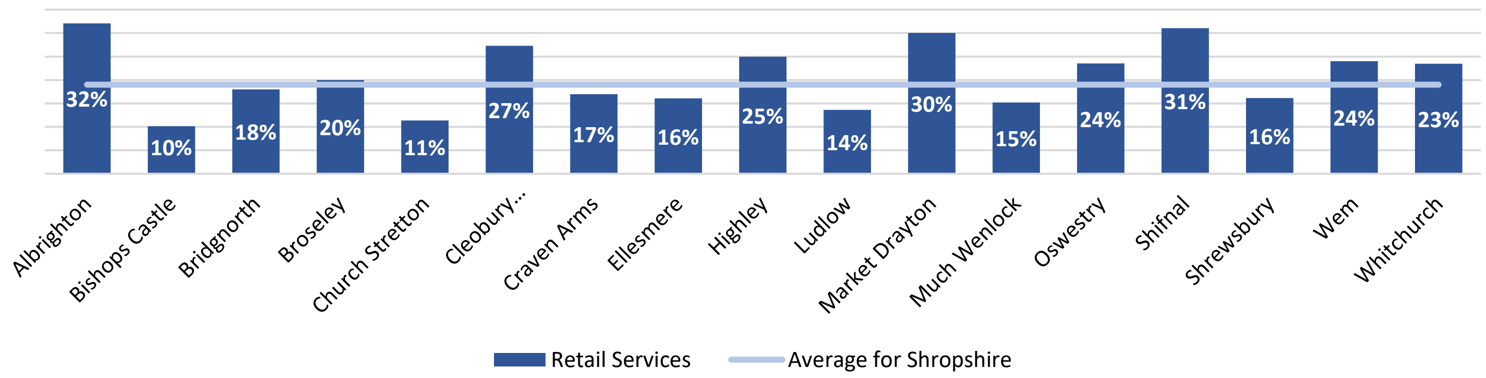


Data from 2023 onwards includes retail services providers located in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that was not included in the survey zone in previous years. This increased the total by four in 2023.

Retail Services: Shares of Total Units by Town, 2025



Relative Importance of Retail Services by Town, 2025



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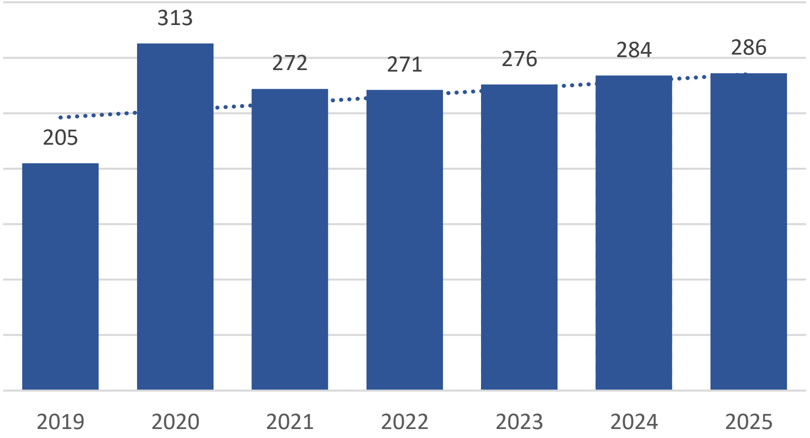
Key Results – Vacant Premises

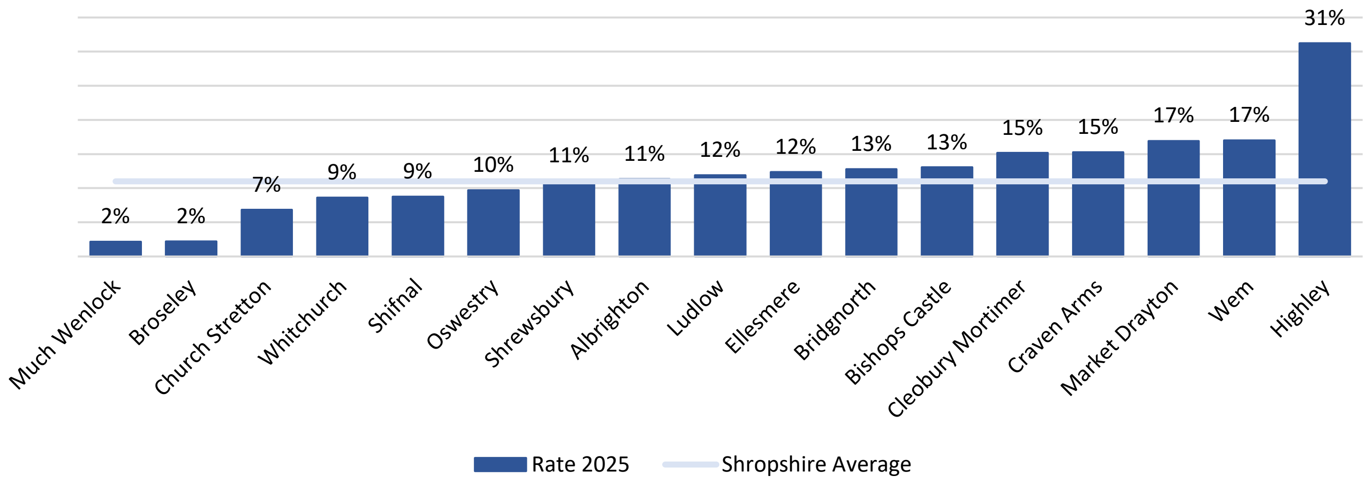
- The number of vacant premises in Shropshire town centres remained virtually unchanged between 2021 and 2023 but ticked upwards in 2024 before stabilising in 2025. There were 286 empty commercial premises in 2025, which represents an increase of two compared with the previous year.
- The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on vacancies, with the number rising by 108 between 2019 and 2020 (+53%).
- There was a notable level of recovery in 2021, with vacancies falling to 272 (-13%) but vacancy levels nonetheless remain elevated compared with pre-pandemic norms.
- The Shropshire vacancy rate has remained at 11% for each of the last four years. This is lower than the national average (13.5% in the third quarter of 2025 according to BRC).

Number of Vacant Units



Data from 2023 onwards includes vacant units located in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury that was not included in the survey zone in previous years. This increased the total by four in 2023

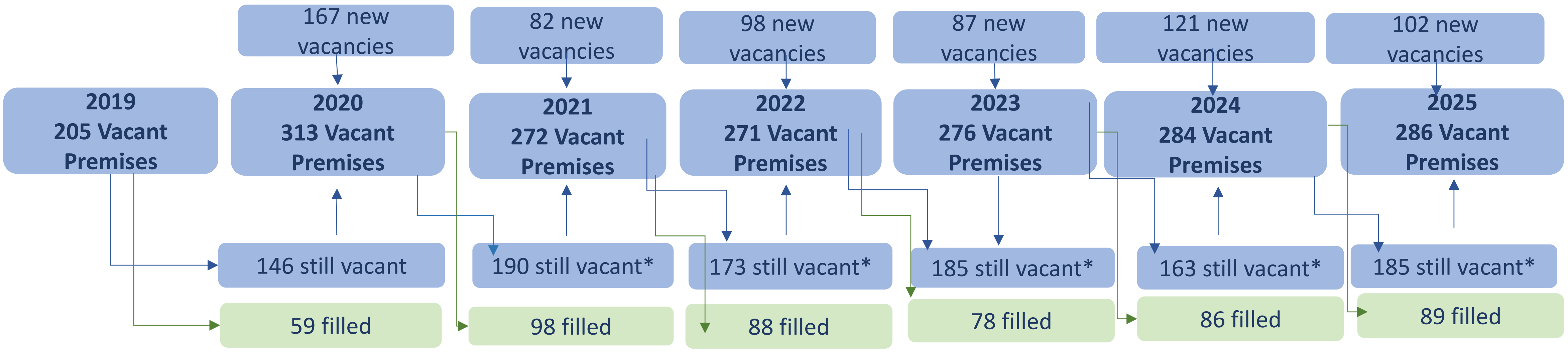
Vacancy Rates by Town, 2025



- Vacancy rates are higher than the Shropshire average in nine of the towns surveyed – they are significantly higher than elsewhere in Highley (31%), Wem and Market Drayton (both 17%). Alongside Craven Arms and Cleobury Mortimer, these are the only towns where the vacancy rate is above the national average.
- At the other end of the scale, vacancy rates are lowest in Church Stretton, Broseley and Much Wenlock.

Key Results – Vacant Premises

- 102 premises across the surveyed Shropshire towns have become vacant between the 2024 and 2025 audits. This is a decrease of 16% compared with 2024 but is still the second highest recorded in any year since 2020. In 2025, 89 premises which were vacant in 2024 had been filled; this represents an increase of three compared with 2024.
- New vacancies represented 36% of all vacancies in 2025 meaning over six out of ten vacant units have been unoccupied for at least a year.
- 30% of all new vacant premises were located in Shrewsbury in 2025, with Oswestry and Market Drayton also accounting for more than one in 10.
- Shrewsbury and Oswestry accounted for 45% of previously vacant premises becoming occupied between them.



Note: Excludes previously vacant premises which are no longer classed as commercial, including Pride Hill Centre, Riverside Centre and units repurposed as residential premises. Also excludes premises in the Castle Foregate area of Shrewsbury in 2023 which was not included as part of the survey zone until this year.

Key Results – Vacancy Premises

- The adjacent chart show that in units terms, the number of vacant units is 40% higher across the Shropshire towns now than pre-pandemic.
- However, there are fewer vacancies in Much Wenlock, Whitchurch and Shrewsbury than there were in 2019.
- In contrast, in 2025, the number of unoccupied vacant units was more than twice as high compared to 2019 in Highley, Cleobury Mortimer, Ludlow and Bridgnorth (all of these from a low base).
- In Broseley and Cleobury Mortimer, a number of premises are being repurposed from commercial to residential.
- In Ludlow and Bridgnorth, meanwhile, levels of unoccupied premises were exceptionally low pre-pandemic, rose significantly in 2020 and have yet to fully recover.

% Change in the Number of Vacant Premises, 2019-2025