Checking out

The varying performance of high streets across the country

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Executive summary

The performance of the Great British high street is seen as a political bellwether, creating a very visual symbol of the success of an area. It is for this reason that politicians have long taken a keen interest in them: the term 'high street' has been mentioned over 3,300 times in the House of Commons and House of Lords over the last five years.[1]

When reading research reports and newspaper articles you would be forgiven for thinking that the high street is suffering everywhere. While it has certainly come under pressure from the rise of out-of-town retail, and more recently online shopping, in some centres it is still performing well.

The clearest examples of this are London and Cambridge, where around one in 10 shops in their city centres are empty. This is in sharp contrast to Newport and Bradford, where close to one in five shops are vacant.

What drives these differences? This report uses millions of credit and debit card transactions to look at where spending comes from and what it is spent on in city centres. It shows that the following four factors influence performance:

1. **Size of the catchment.** The larger the catchment, the more potential customers there are to sell to. This catchment is influenced by both the size of the city – large cities naturally have larger catchments – and the number of competing centres in the surrounding area – Norwich has a much larger catchment than Sunderland, which has both Newcastle city centre and the Metrocentre in close proximity. Sunderland has a much higher share of spend that 'leaks' out to other places than Norwich does as a result.
2. **Incomes in the catchment, which is driven by the performance of the 'export' economy.** The more money people earn, the more they have to spend. While Hull and Reading have similar-sized catchments, average incomes in the latter are around 25 per cent higher than the former. Vacancy rates are over 4 percentage points lower too.

1 Source: Hansard

Incomes are higher in places like Reading because it has a strongly-performing export economy. Companies in the export base sell to national and international markets, bringing money into the local economy and into people's pockets which they in turn spend on the high street. In Reading's case London provides a further source of prosperity, with those who live in Reading but work in London spending a portion of that wage in their 'home' city centre too.

3. **The geography of the economy.** Where the economy clusters, as well as how well it performs, is an important factor. In cities such as Swindon and Slough, their highly productive but mainly suburban export economies pull workers out to low density business and industrial parks, making weekday spending in the city centre more difficult. On the contrary, while a city like Birmingham has an underperforming export economy overall, the clustering of the high-skilled element of its export base in its centre creates a reason for people to be in the city centre, with a knock-on impact on spend and high street performance (and likely its appeal to visitors too).
4. **The size of the visitor economy.** Those cities that are able to pull in visitors extend the size of their catchment. In York city centre, visitors account for 40 per cent of all spending. It is the only city centre where total visitor spend is higher than total residential spend.

These elements shape both the amenity 'offer' in a city centre and its ability to adapt to the challenges that the high street has faced in recent decades. As well as fewer empty shops, strong performers also tend to have a larger 'premium' amenity offer. They also have larger shares of spending and commercial space in food activities. This is because while demand for physical retail has declined, in more affluent areas demand for food-based amenities has increased. Where demand is high, the private sector has pivoted towards this type of amenity. Where it isn't, this pivot has not occurred, and struggling high streets find themselves with an oversupply of retail space.

To change the performance of the high street, policy should focus on how it can change the factors affecting its performance (something much recent policy has not done). And it has more control over some than others.

The most fundamental one is incomes. Much high street policy in the past has focused on the high street itself. But this has misinterpreted the cause of its struggles. In most struggling places people have got too little money to spend to sustain a thriving high street. And this is determined by the performance of the exporting part of the economy. Any policy interventions to save the high street shouldn't start with the high street itself, but the wider economy, and where it locates in a city. **A struggling high street is the outcome of a struggling economy, not the other way round.**

The scope policy has over changing the size of a catchment is more limited given how it is shaped by proximity to neighbouring centres of leisure, and a place should consider what role the city centre high street plays in its region, and set ambitions to match this. There are two options though. One is to increase the density of housing close to the centre where demand permits. The second is in instances where the catchment does not include more affluent areas that are in feasible travel distance, such as richer neighbourhoods within the city, then there may be scope for attracting these people in with the right offer. But its ability to substantially grow the size of the catchment, particularly when the city has a larger neighbouring centre, is much more constrained. In these instances it is better to consider what role the city-centre high street plays in its region – likely more of a local centre than a regional one - and shaping ambitions to match this.

The scope for attracting in visitors is likely to be limited too without a clear visitor offer. While York is a clear example of where visitor spend boosts the high street, this is based on the preserved history of the city. The challenge for most struggling city centres is that they struggle to attract in their own residents, never mind visitors. And so boosting visitor numbers will likely start with changing its appeal to residents first, which will be underpinned by the performance of the economy.

All of this means that policymakers should use the following two principles when looking to improve the fortunes of the high street:

1. Form all policies towards high streets in the context of broader economic policy. At the very least policymakers must do any high street-specific interventions alongside broader economic interventions in the city centre.
2. Tailor the approach to what is achievable given the role the high street plays in the regional leisure economy. The size of large centres such as Manchester means they are better placed to play the role of a regional centre. And the proximity of such centres will also shape what the best possible version of a smaller city centre high street looks like.

In terms of specific policies:

- National and local policy should gear itself towards making city centres better places to do business. Nationally the Government should recognise city centres as critical national infrastructure and allocate £5 billion of its £113 billion of earmarked capital investments into those centres that have a strategy for public investment. This money should focus on remodelling city centres to remove surplus space, improve the public realm and build new office space.
- Local government should increase the size of the catchment through increasing housing densities within brownfield sites on the fringe of city centres, where there is demand for this type of inner city living, as opposed to more sprawl developments on the edge of town.
- Local government should facilitate the visitor economy where there is a clear 'visitor offer', but it should beware of the limited scope there is to do this. A big challenge in a number of city centres is that they struggle to pull even their own residents in, never mind visitors.
- Business rates are often blamed for the struggles of the high street. National government should reform the business rates system. But it should do this because

the system doesn't function very well, rather than in any attempt to 'save' the high street. The root cause of the struggles of poorly-performing high streets is not the fault of the business rates system – large shares of properties in these places don't pay any business rates – and any reform driven by this idea will likely result in an even more distorted system, rather than less.

01

Introduction

The performance of the Great British high street is seen as a political bellwether, creating a very visual symbol of the success of an area. For example, recent research pegged the rise of the populist vote to their declining fortunes.[2] It is for this reason that politicians have long taken a very keen interest in them: the term 'high street' has been mentioned over 3,300 times in the House of Commons and House of Lords over the last five years.[3]

This attention has spurred many reports on the topic of high streets. The most high-profile of these was the Government-commissioned Portas Review in 2011, and many more have followed since.

This report goes much further than previous work to understand the drivers of high street performance. Focusing in on the city centres of the 63 largest cities in the UK, it uses millions of debit and credit card transactions from Fable Data to look at spending patterns across each. In doing so it provides estimates of the catchment area of each city centre, the 'leakage' of spend from each city to other areas, the composition of spend in city centres and the varying patterns of consumption of people from less and more affluent areas and how this shapes the 'offer' of a place.

The report is set out as follows:

- Section 2 assesses the performance of city centre high streets on four measures: the size of their catchments; the incomes of people in those catchments; the performance of the city centre economy that they sit within, and; the size of the visitor economy.
- Section 3 looks at the impact this has on the 'offer' of each city-centre high street, including the type and range of amenities on offer, the makeup of commercial space and how high streets have adapted to changing consumer demand over the last 15 years.
- Section 4 looks at recent policy attempts to boost the high street.

2 Fetzer T, Edenhofer J and Garg P (2024), Local Decline and Populism, CEPR Discussion Paper No. 19330, Paris & London: CEPR Press
3 Source: Hansard

- Section 5 concludes with a range of policy recommendations for both local and national policymakers.

Box 1: Methodology

Definition of spending

This report looks at data capturing walk-up, often 'spontaneous', in-person spending among locals and visitors. It cannot account for in-person experiences that are pre-booked online, such as cinema or theatre tickets for example.

Definition of centres

This report uses the Geographic Data Service (GeoDS, formerly the Consumer Data Research Centre) definition of a high street in the city centre of the UK's 63 largest cities as its starting point. In most cases it mapped these on to workplace zones (or equivalent geographies), including any workplace zone that the high street definition falls into. In some cases GeoDS's definition was deemed as too broad, capturing retail parks adjacent to city centres (and often separated by a ring road). Huddersfield, Warrington and Stoke are examples of this. In these instances the retail park was removed. In larger city centres GeoDS identified multiple high streets within the urban core. Here, Centre for Cities combined in-house knowledge of these city centres to capture those that fall within the central business district area and those that don't.

Data used in this report

Spending data is provided by Fable data. The dataset consists of over 60 million individual-level transactions with demographic information of cardholder, merchant, day and amount of spend.

Data on **incomes** is for sub local authority areas from the ONS and the Scottish Government. Using sub local authority geographies makes estimating precise catchment areas possible. The latest data available for this measure is 2018.

Data on **high street vacancy rates** is not publicly available. A number of local authorities do publish data on empty properties from their business rates records. Of the 63 centres used in this report, 37 have made their data available to Centre for Cities. In addition to this data not covering all cities, analysis of it suggested that it wasn't collected consistently across authorities. So estimates were created using a regression including this data, rateable values (as a proxy for rent), the change in high street units since 2020 and previously published data from the Local Data Company to create data for 2025.

Data on **commercial property use** comes from the Valuations Office Agency.

02

The drivers of high street performance

What influences the performance of the high street in city centres? This section looks at four factors: the size of their catchments; the incomes of people in those catchments; the performance of the city centre economy that they sit within, and; the size of the visitor economy.

The high street isn’t struggling everywhere, but there is a wide variation in performance

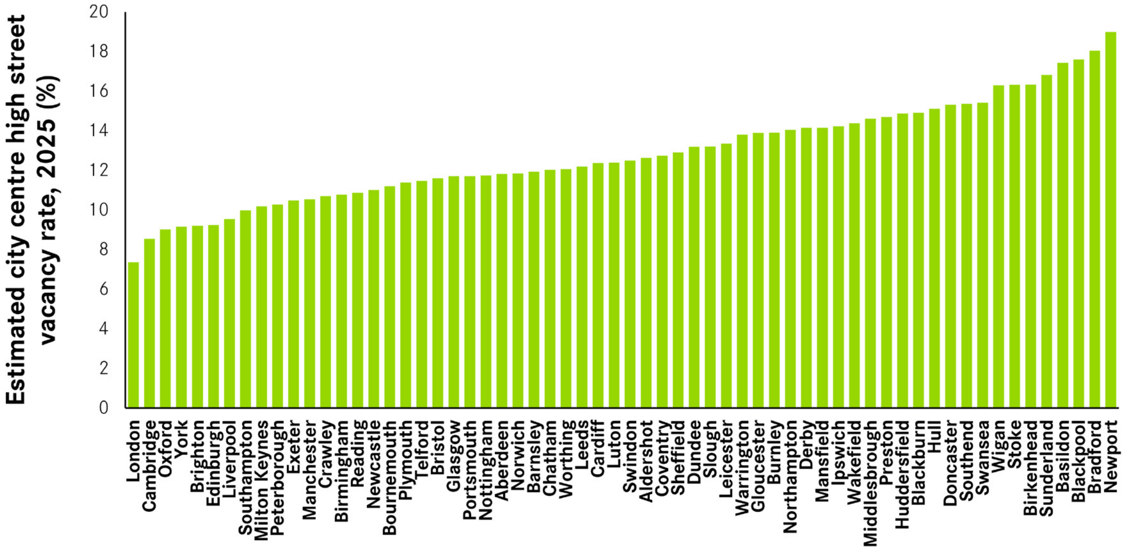
While most press stories on the high street are focused on its struggles, it isn’t struggling everywhere.

Firstly, city centres remain centres of consumption as well as production. They cover 0.1 per cent of land but 9.1 per cent of face-to-face spending in 2024.

Secondly, a number of high streets have relatively few empty shops. Figure 1 shows that Central London has the lowest vacancy rate in 2025, followed by Cambridge, Edinburgh and York. But there is a wide variation in performance. Newport had the highest vacancy rate, followed by Bradford and Blackpool. In this latter group, the vacancy rate was more than double the former group.

Figure 1: **City centre high street vacancy rates are more than twice as high in Newport and Bradford than in London and Cambridge**

Estimated city centre high street vacancy rate, 2025



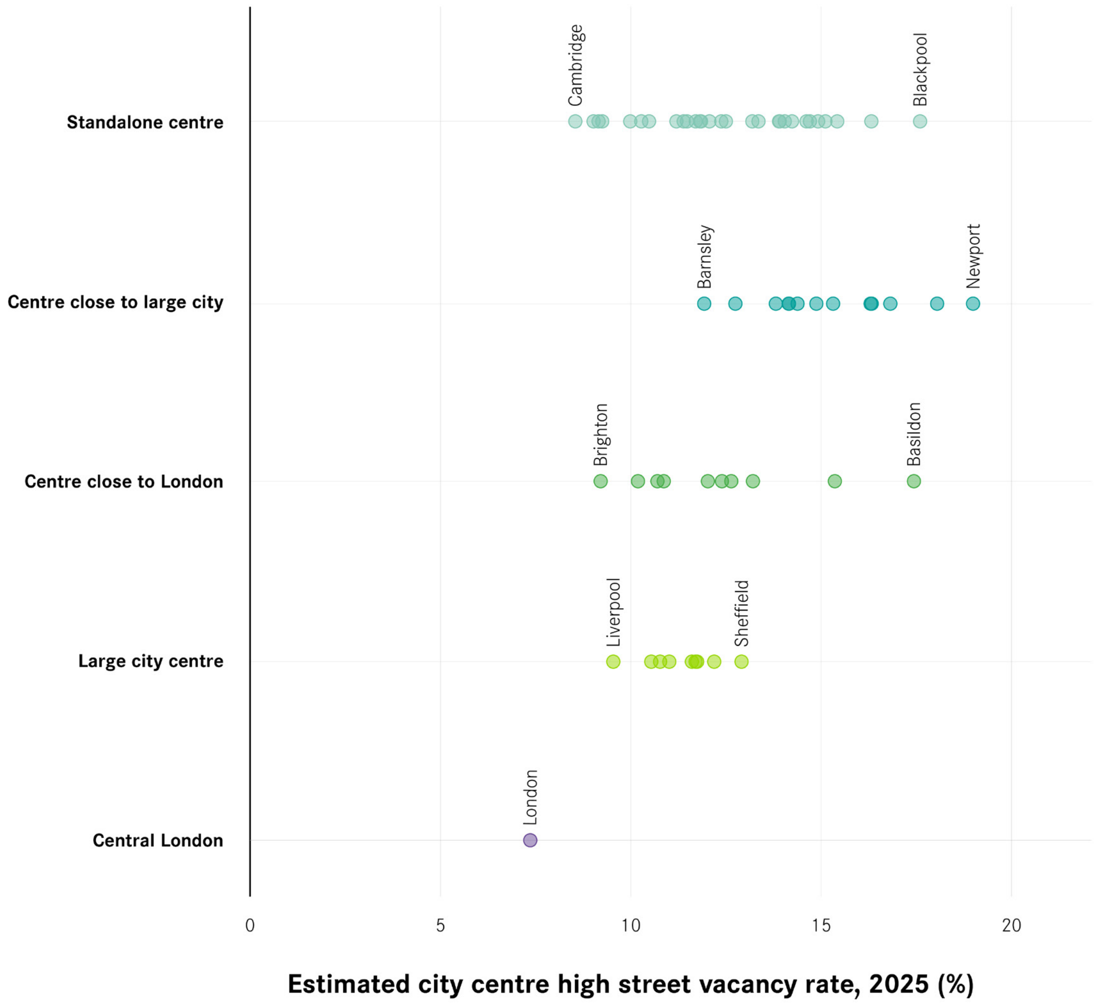
Source: Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

Categorising city centres according to their proximity to other centres of consumption brings extra context to these figures. Figure 2 groups centres into the following groups: London; large cities (by population); cities in proximity to London; cities in proximity to large cities, and; standalone cities.

As a group, large cities have the lowest vacancy rates. City centres close to London also tend to have lower rates despite their proximity to the Capital. This is in contrast to city centres close to other large cities, which as a group have higher rates. Finally, there is a mix of performance in city centres without any large rival neighbours. Edinburgh, York and Cambridge have some of the lowest rates of any city centre. In contrast Blackpool, Swansea and Stoke have some of the highest – they perform poorly despite not having any neighbouring competing centres of leisure.

Figure 2: As a group, larger cities tend to have lower city centre high street vacancy rates

Estimated city centre high street vacancy rate, 2025



Source: Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

Some city centres have a much larger pull than others

The success of a city-centre high street in part is determined by the size of the market it can sell to. And city centres across the country exert very different pulls on their surrounding areas.

Unsurprisingly, those city centres with larger catchment areas tend to have lower vacancy rates (see Figure 3).[4] Low-vacancy London has 8.4 million people in its catchment. High-vacancy Wigan has 114,000. There are a number of anomalies to the bottom left of the chart, which include Oxford, Cambridge and York. This is likely to be the result of the size of their visitor economies expanding their catchments, which is discussed later in this section.

4 A medium super output area is defined as being within the catchment of any one centre if at least 4.3 per cent of in person spend happens in this centre. This threshold is the 95th percentile of share of spend in any city centre by all MSOAs (and Scottish and Northern Irish equivalents) in the UK.

Figure 3: Those city centres with larger catchments tend to have lower high street vacancy rates

The relationship between catchment size and vacancy rates

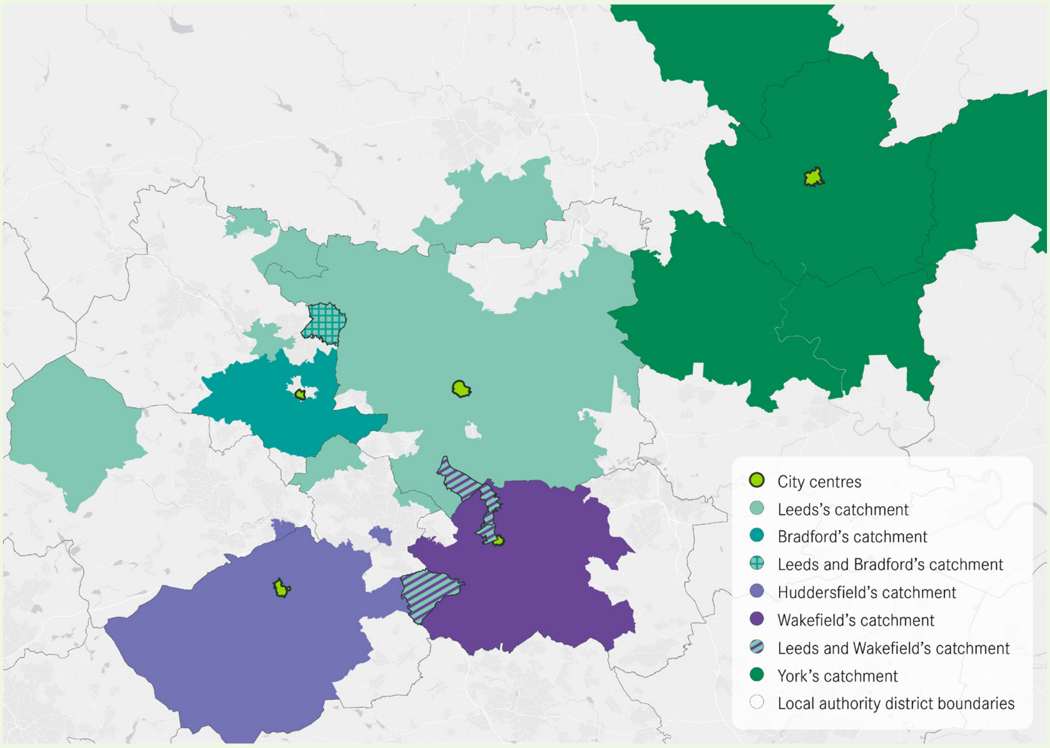
Source: Fable Data; ONS; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data • Note: For presentational purposes, Aldershot is excluded from this chart because it has a catchment much smaller than any other city centre.

The size of the catchment is shaped by both the size of the city itself and its proximity to its neighbours. Figure 6 shows the 'leakage' of a city's resident spend to other city centres (light green) and large shopping malls (dark green). Large city centres and standalone city centres tend to see lower leakage to other city centres, in contrast to those close to large cities. Birkenhead has the largest leakage overall to another city centre – 7.5 per cent of all resident spend from the city is done in a rival centre, mainly in Liverpool city centre. Wakefield, Huddersfield and Bradford aren't far behind, and Box 2 shows how catchment areas for these city centres in West Yorkshire are shaped by Leeds.

Box 2: How Leeds shapes the catchment area of its surrounding city centres, and the impact of a lack of competition in Norfolk

Leeds' role as a regional centre of consumption influences the size of the catchment of neighbouring city centres. Figure 4 shows Leeds' catchment to stretch beyond the city boundaries, and squeezes the size of Bradford city centre's catchment in particular, which has a catchment contained well within its local authority boundaries.

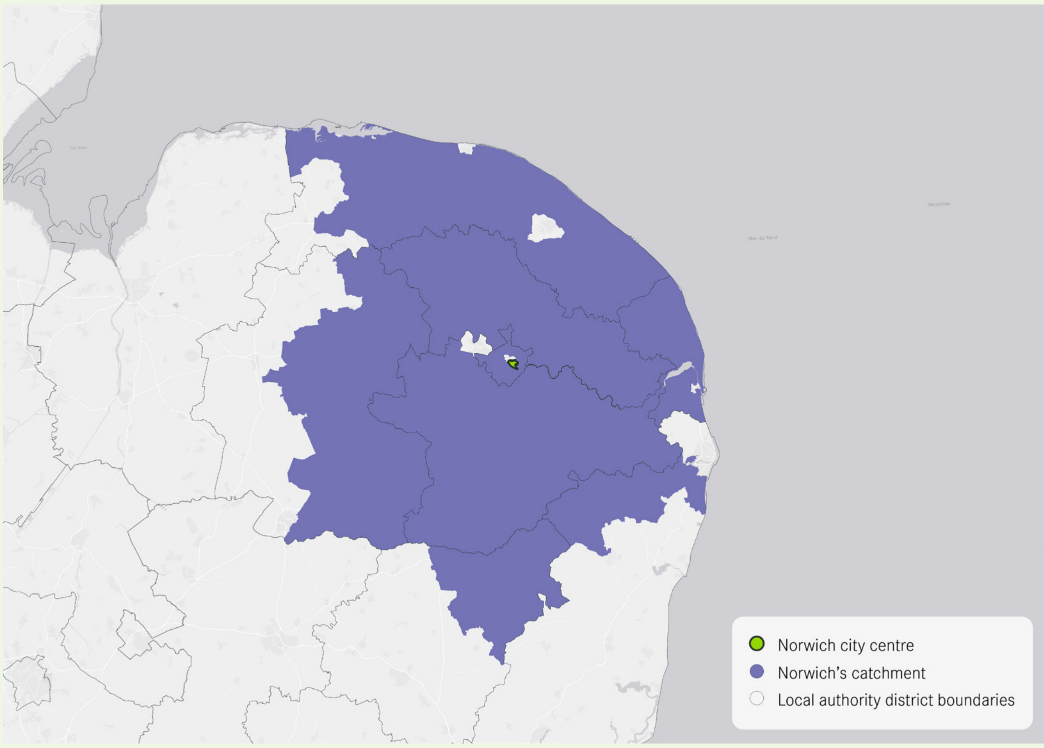
Figure 4: Leeds plays the role of a regional centre, squeezing the catchment areas of its surrounding city centres



Source: Fable Data

While Norwich is smaller than Bradford in population terms, its lack of competing centre of consumption means its catchment spans a much broader area, taking in much of Norfolk. While it is a smaller city, it does act as a regional consumption centre in a way that Bradford's proximity to Leeds means that this is much more difficult to achieve (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Norwich's lack of rivals means its catchment stretches over a large area

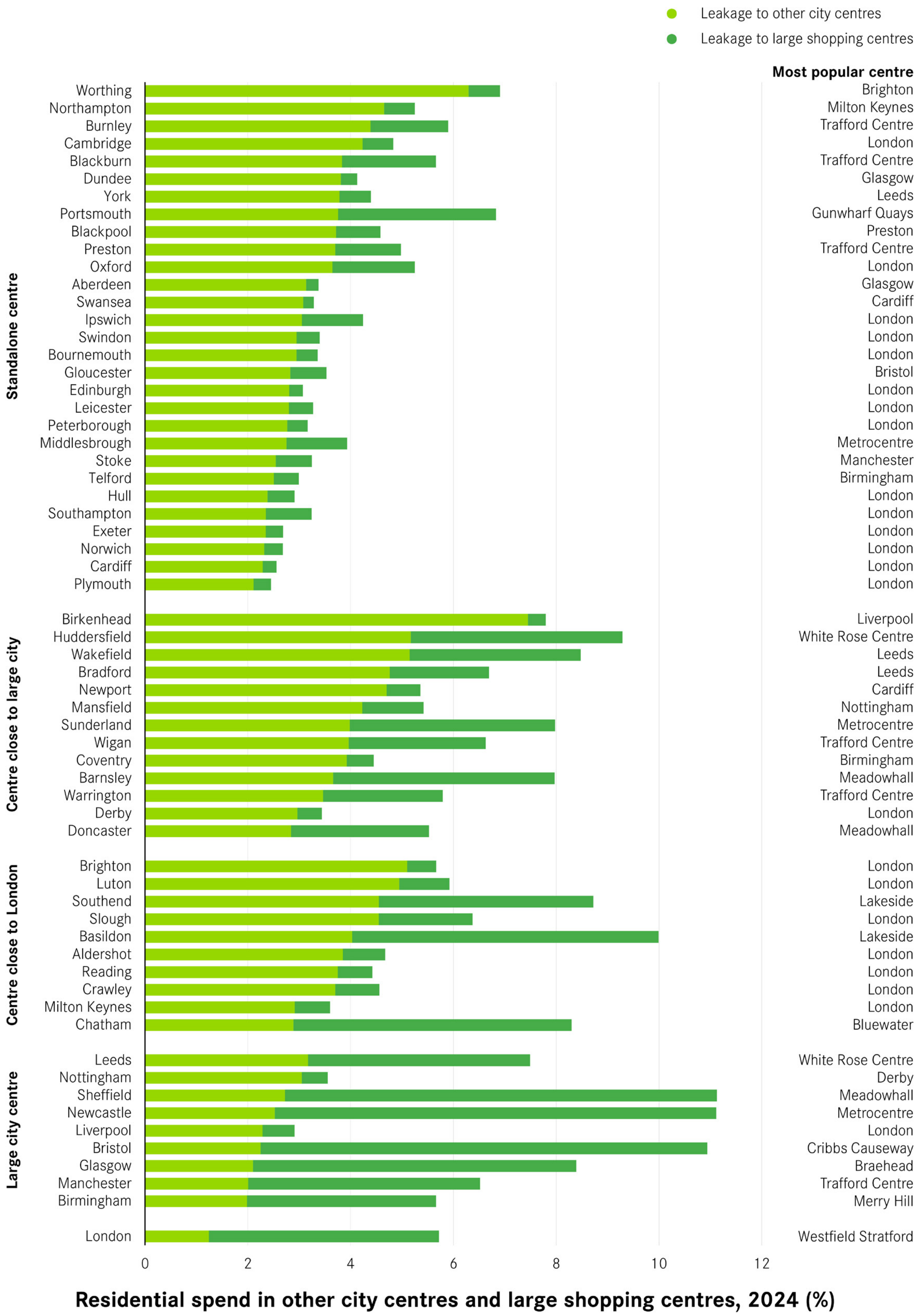


Source: Fable Data

While large city centres aren't rivalled by other city centres, large shopping centres do offer competition. Large shares of resident spend in Sheffield, Newcastle and Bristol are done in Meadowhall, the Metrocentre and Cribbs Causeway respectively. And it is striking how those cities without similar out-of-town shopping centres, such as Nottingham and Liverpool, have low levels of leakage overall (the same also applies to Nottingham's near neighbour Derby). Box 3 discusses the spend that large out-of-town centres capture in their respective regions.

Figure 6: City centres close to large cities tend to have larger leakage, while large city centres are rivalled by out-of-town shopping centres

Residential spend in other city centres and large shopping centres, 2024



Source: Fable Data • Note: The shopping centres selected are the following large non-city centre malls: Bicester, Bluewater, Cribbs Causeway, Lakeside, Meadowhall, Metrocentre, Gunwharf Quays, Trafford Centre, Westfield Hammersmith, Westfield Stratford, White Rose Centre, Merry Hill

Box 3: The role of shopping malls in regional consumption

The largest shopping malls are considerable rivals to their surrounding centres. In the North East the Metrocentre accounts for £1 in every £20 of in-person spend in the region, and has spending and a catchment area that dwarfs those of Newcastle and Sunderland city centres.

Elsewhere they aren't quite so dominant – Manchester and Liverpool city centres account for more spending in the North West than the Trafford Centre, although it is the 3rd largest destination in the region. Leeds is the largest destination by spend in Yorkshire, but Meadowhall and the White Rose centre are 2nd and 4th respectively.

Competition in some cities comes not from neighbours, but from within. Stoke, which despite having no larger neighbours captures the 8th lowest share of spending by its own residents of any city, is a good example of this. Box 4 discusses why.

Box 4: Rival consumption centres within Stoke

While Stoke has no large competing centres of consumption neighbouring the city, it has plenty within.

Stoke historically was six separate towns, brought together in 1910. Hanley has become the de facto city centre, but it isn't the premier destination in the city. The Festival Park retail park close to the city centre is, accounting for 13 per cent of resident spend compared to 8 per cent in the city centre. This is very different to what happens in Brighton for example.

Figure 7: Spending in Stoke city centre is dwarfed by the nearby Festival Park, in contrast to Brighton

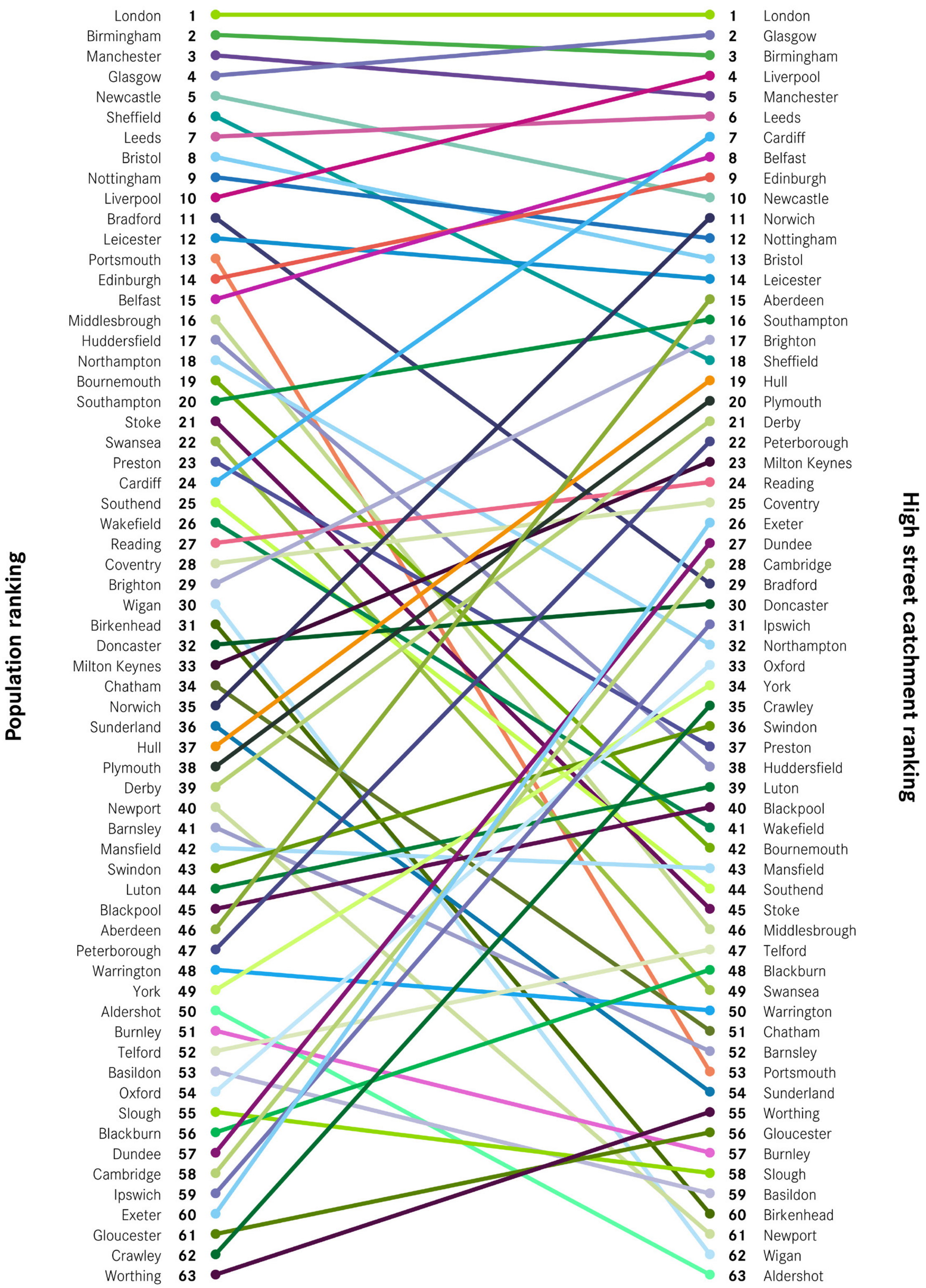
Spending across the Stoke and Brighton Primary Urban Areas

Source: Fable Data

The result is that the population of a city isn't always a good guide to the catchment size of its city centre. Figure 8 ranks cities by their population and the size of their city centre catchment areas. There are some notable shifts. For example, Sheffield is the 6th largest city by population, but its city centre has the 18th largest catchment making it in this respect more like a medium sized city. Cardiff moves in the opposite direction, moving from 24th to 7th as a result of its catchment stretching up into the Welsh Valleys. In this respect it behaves like a large city, and acts as a regional centre for consumption. It accounted for 4.4 per cent of all in-person spending in Wales in 2024, the 5th highest regional share of any UK city.

Figure 8: The catchment area of some city centres looks very different to the population of the city

Ranking of cities by population size and city centre catchment area



Source: Fable Data; ONS

City centres with richer catchments have fewer empty shops

It is not just the size of the catchment but the affluence of it that influences the size of the market that high street businesses can sell to. Figure 9 shows that those places with richer catchments, such as Milton Keynes, have fewer empty shops. It is for this reason that places with similar-sized catchments have different shares of empty shops. Hull and Reading are examples – they have catchments of around 400,000 people, but incomes are 26 per cent higher and vacancy rates more than 4 percentage points lower in the latter.

Figure 9: City centre high streets with richer catchments have fewer empty shops

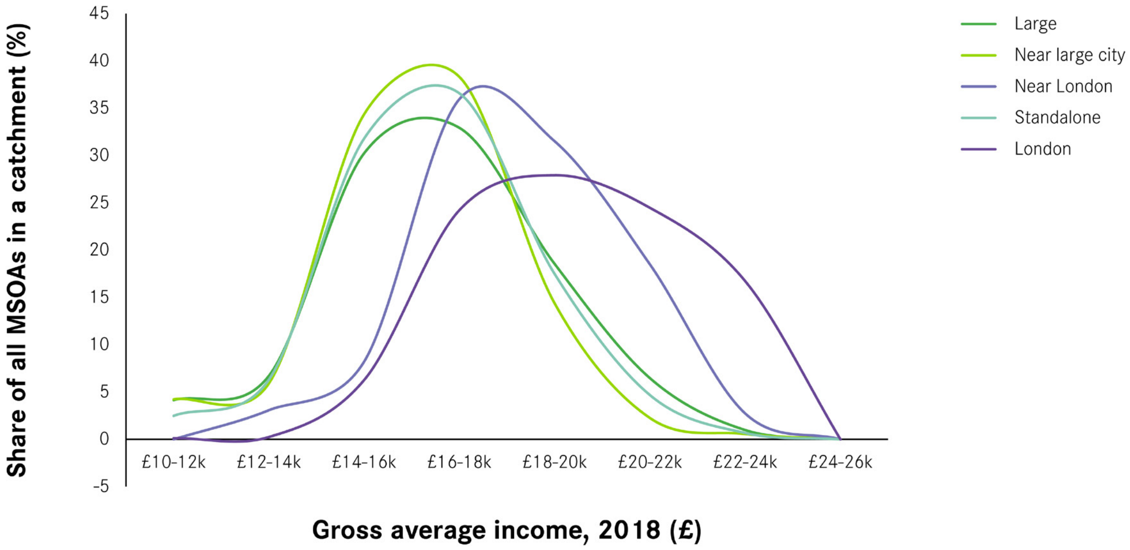
The relationship between average income of the catchment and the city centre high street vacancy rate

Source: Fable Data; ONS; Scottish Government; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

It is incomes that are the main distinction between city centres surrounding London relative to city centres close to large cities elsewhere in the country. The average sizes of the catchments of each group are very similar. But as Figure 10 shows, incomes are not. The distribution of incomes is skewed to the right for centres close to London, showing them to have many more affluent potential customers in their catchments. Over half of neighbourhoods in these areas had incomes above £18,000 in 2018, compared to 18 per cent in the catchments of centres close to large cities.

Figure 10: City centres in the Greater South East have much richer catchments than city centres elsewhere

Distribution of incomes in the catchments of different groups of city centres

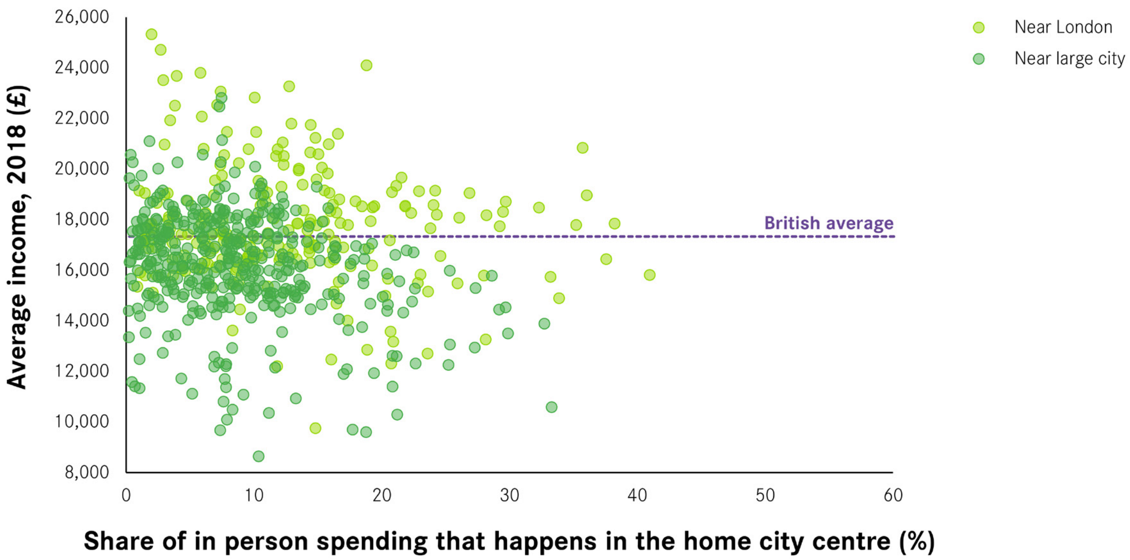


Source: Fable Data; ONS; Scottish Government

Compounding this, those city centres with the lowest income catchments also tend to struggle to capture spending from the more affluent neighbourhoods that they do have. Figure 11 plots the average income of neighbourhoods in cities and their share of in-person spending in their resident city centre for two groups: those cities close to London, and other large cities. That the latter group has many fewer neighbourhoods that have incomes higher than the English and Welsh average underlines the point on differences in affluence. In addition, city centres close to London are better at attracting spend from their most affluent neighbourhoods. One in 10 neighbourhoods have above average incomes and spend more than 15 per cent in their resident city centre. For cities close to large cities it is less than one in 100. Box 5 discusses how this plays out in Sunderland and Newcastle.

Figure 11: City centres close to large cities both have low income catchments and struggle to capture spend from more affluent neighbourhoods

The relationship between area income and spending in the resident city centre for cities close to London and other large cities

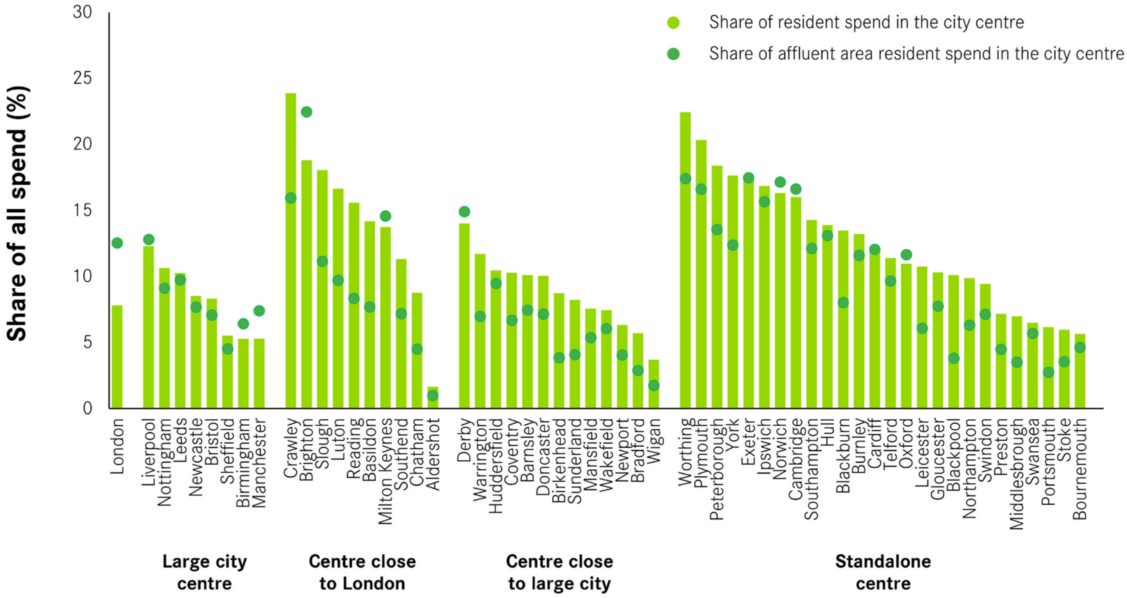


Source: Fable Data; ONS

In general poorer neighbourhoods use their city centres more than more affluent ones. In Bradford for example, residents spend just 5.7 per cent of all in-person spend in Bradford city centre. But residents in the city's most affluent neighbourhoods spend just 2.9 per cent of their spending there (see Figure 12). There are some exceptions though – 12 places are more successful at capturing their more affluent spend. The most notable of these are London and Brighton.

Figure 12: City centres with low incomes tend to struggle to capture spending from the more affluent neighbourhoods they do have

Share of resident spending in the home city centre



Source: Fable Data; ONS;

Box 5: The varying ability of Sunderland and Newcastle city centres in capturing spend from their more affluent neighbourhoods

Not only does Sunderland city centre have a low income catchment, but it also struggles to capture spend from the few higher income areas within the city. Figure 13 shows that:

Neighbourhoods in the city have low average incomes overall – most medium super output areas (MSOAs) have incomes below the English and Welsh average.

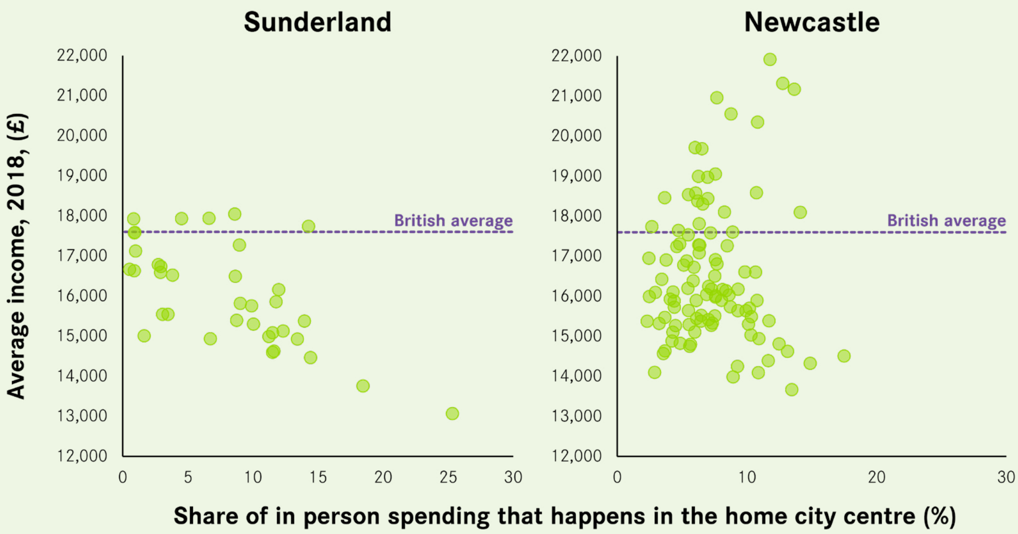
Sunderland's more affluent MSOAs don't spend much in Sunderland city centre – the top right of the chart for Sunderland is empty.

The poorer the MSOA, the more likely it is to shop in Sunderland city centre.

This is in contrast to its nearest big neighbour Newcastle. It both has a higher number of neighbourhoods above the English and Welsh average, and these more affluent areas do spend in Newcastle city centre alongside the poorer ones – the top right hand side of the chart for Newcastle has data points in it.

Figure 13: Newcastle city centre does a better job of capturing the spending from its limited number of affluent neighbourhoods than Sunderland

Share of all spending done in the city centre by neighbourhoods



Source: Fable Data; ONS

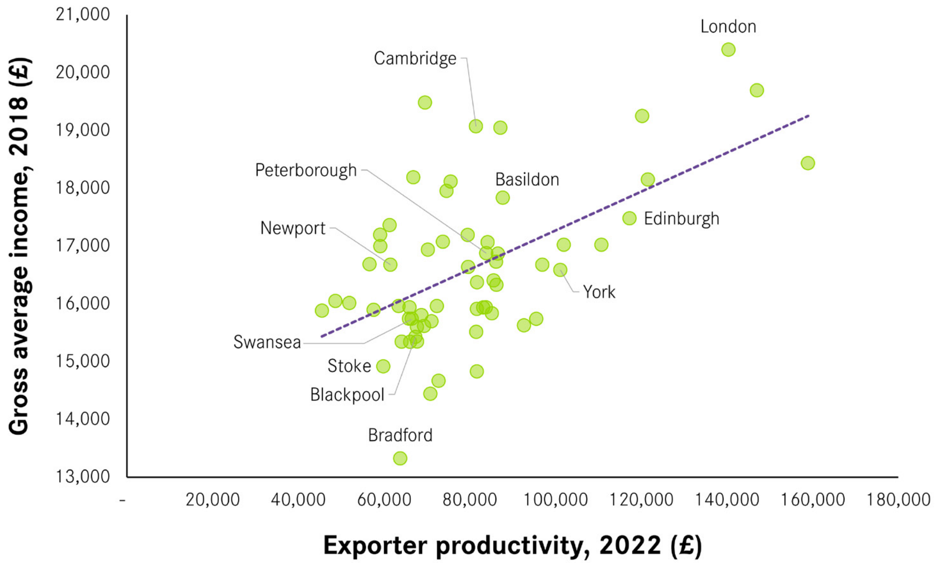
Incomes are mainly determined by the performance of the local economy

Incomes are in large part determined by the performance of the economy, or more specifically the 'export' economy (see Figure 14). Exporter businesses, such as those in manufacturing, software development or finance, sell to markets beyond their local area. This brings money into the local economy, which people can then spend on local services – such as shops, bars and restaurants – on their local high street. It is for this reason that places with stronger economies have stronger high streets – the high street is the outcome of a stronger economy.

Stoke and Swansea are two good illustrations of this in the standalone grouping. Neither have any large neighbours and so have relatively little leakage of spending to other areas (see Figure 6 above). But they have poorly-performing economies which limit the amount of money people have to spend in their city centres. Vacancies are higher as a result.

Figure 14: The performance of the export economy largely determines incomes

The relationship between the productivity of the export economy and the gross average income of a city centre high street's catchment area



Source: Fable Data; ONS

For those city centres that are close to London the capital complements this by acting as a further source of prosperity – the average transaction size of those who work in the capital but live in a surrounding city is 1.3 times that of other residents. So while London pulls people in from surrounding areas (acting as a rival centre of consumption), it also boosts spending power around such city centres.

Most city centres around other large cities are affected by the former – their catchment is shaped by the presence of their bigger neighbour. But the economic underperformance of these large cities means that they don't benefit as much as they should from the spending power boost – spending by commuters to large cities in their home city centre is 1.1 times that of their fellow residents, and they do smaller shares of their overall spending in their home city centre too (commuters to big cities do 8 per cent of their spending in their home city centre, compared to the 12 per cent that London workers do in their home city centres). So not only do these cities themselves have poorly-performing economies, but their bigger neighbours provide a source of competition for their high street without also providing a source of prosperity.

City centres with strong economies have stronger high streets

It isn't just the strength of the economy that matters, but where it is located in the city. In cities where their economies are more suburban in nature, fewer people are able to go into the centre during the working week. This limits footfall for high street businesses.

Generally, stronger economies are the result of strong city centre economies. Increasingly high-skilled service exporting activities have a preference for a city centre location, namely because it gives them access: access to high-skilled workers and access to a network of other high-skilled businesses.[5] Figure 15 shows this largely to be the case.

Figure 15: City centres with stronger economies have stronger high streets

The relationship between the productivity of the city's export base, the share of jobs in a city centre that are high-skilled and the high street vacancy rate

Source: ONS: Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

Those to the bottom left have both weak city centres and wider city economies. And most have high vacancy rates. The opposite is the case for those towards the top right: these economic strengths lead to city-centre high streets performing strongly.

The exceptions to the general relationship help underline the rule. Places such as Slough and Swindon have strong economies, but this is driven by out-of-town activity. They have a higher share of empty shops than their economic performance alone would suggest. On the flip side, there are cities like Birmingham that have strong city centre economies even if their wider economic performance is poorer. And they have lower vacancy rates than their wider economic performance alone would predict.

Strong city-centre economies are a hallmark of larger cities in particular. This is reflective of the greater access to workers and businesses that they provide over smaller centres.

5 Swinney P (2021), So you want to level up? London: Centre for Cities

Visitors swell the size of the market that high street businesses can sell to

Attracting visitors is another way to boost footfall. And as Figure 16 shows, those city centres where visitor spend makes up a larger share of overall spend, vacancy rates are lower. The one clear exception to this is Blackpool.

Figure 16: City centres that are able to pull in more visitor spend have lower vacancy rates

The relationship between vacancy rates and share of all spend in a city centre done by visitors

Source: Fable Data; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

In terms of groups of centres, visitors play a larger role in large city centres and a subset of standalone centres such as York, Oxford and Cambridge. These visitors effectively swell the catchment of these latter places. They play a much smaller role in centres close to London or large cities, with Milton Keynes and Brighton being the exceptions, meaning that proximity of bigger neighbours is likely once again to shape how many visitors such centres can attract.

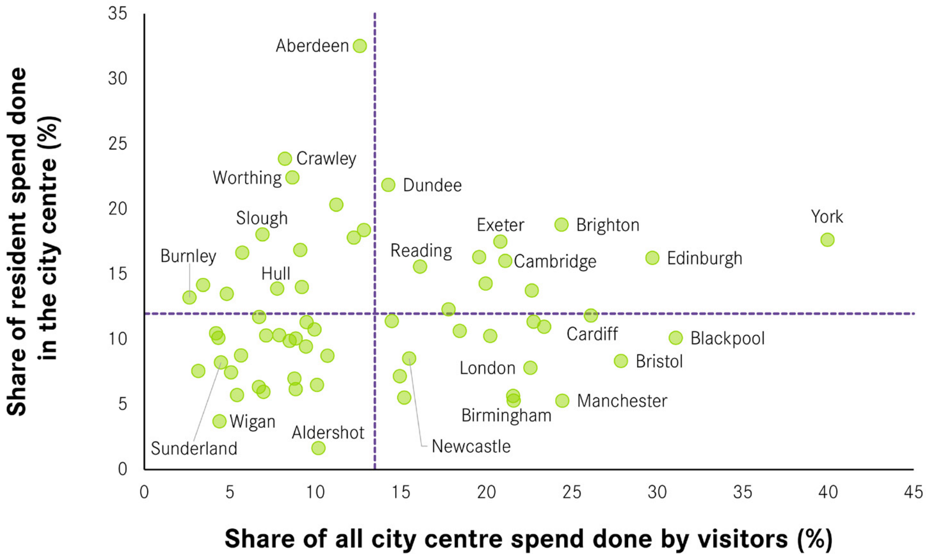
It is the 'offer' of a city centre that will determine its ability to attract visitors. In York's instance, this is likely founded on its unique array of historic architecture. For other places it will be driven by the range of shops, bars, theatres and museums that are available. The size of the catchment is a determinant of this though – supporting more specialist amenities such as West End theatres and themed museums requires a sufficient number of customers to come and use them.

Improving the visitor offer is an option for cities. Where this is a unique asset that could pull in a greater number of visitors than is currently the case, there could be a case for intervention. Where though it is based on offering a better range of bars and restaurants than is currently the case then this could prove more challenging.

The rule of thumb on the viability of increasing visitor spending should be how attractive a city centre is to its own residents – if it is failing to pull in even its own residents, then it is unlikely that it will succeed in attracting more visitors. Figure 17 shows this to be the case for the 23 city centres that are in the bottom left quadrant - they have both low residential and visitor spending.

Figure 17: A number of city centres struggle to attract their own residents, suggesting any strategy to boost visitors may struggle

Grouping of city centre high streets according to residential and visitor spend within them, 2024



Source: Fable Data

To increase visitor spend, cities should first address the reasons why their city centres aren't able to attract in local spend. The good news is that in addressing these reasons, they are likely to make the city centre a more attractive place for tourists to come too.

While the internet has reshaped high streets, it hasn't 'killed' the most successful ones

Out of town retail and the internet have certainly put pressure on high street retail. But higher internet spend doesn't necessarily mean the city centre high streets struggle. Figure 18 provides a measure of how much people in cities spend on online retail against city centre high street vacancies. There is no relationship between the two. It is possible that the internet has increased vacancies everywhere – data isn't available before the advent of online shopping to check this – but it is not the case that places that do more shopping online have more poorly performing city centre high streets. This would suggest that in places with higher incomes, whilst the internet has diverted retail spending, higher incomes mean that there is still money to spend in bricks and mortar outlets. The next section discusses what this money is spent on.

Figure 18: There is no relationship between online retail spending and high street vacancies

Ratio of share of UK online retail spend share to population share and estimated city centre high street vacancy rates

Source: Fable Data; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

The economy is the biggest factor for high street performance

While the above identifies four factors that have an impact on vacancy rates, it doesn't say anything of the magnitude of each. Running a regression gives an indication of the relative importance of each factor. The more negative the number in the coefficient column of Table 1, the larger its impact. Incomes have the biggest impact (a 1 percent increase in incomes leads to a 0.8 per cent fall in vacancy rates), followed by strength of the city centre economy. While visitor spending and catchment size also have an impact, the size of this impact is much smaller than the economy factors.

Table 1: Average income in the catchment has the largest impact on city centre hight street vacancy rates

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error
Catchment size	-0.14	0.06**
Average catchment income	-0.81	0.17**
Strength of city centre economy	-0.29	0.14**
Visitor share of city centre spend	-0.11	0.04**
Number of retail and leisure units	0.11	0.05**
Constant	11.38	1.73**

Note: Dependent variable: Estimated city centre high street vacancy rate, 2025. All data is logged. Regression run with robust standard errors
** Significant at the 5 per cent level

03

Implications for the 'offer' of a city centre

What do these factors mean for the amenity offer of a city centre? This section looks at what amenities are available in a city centre, and how this has changed in recent years.

Successful centres have pivoted away from retail towards cafes and restaurants

City centres with lower vacancy rates tend to have a higher proportion of their spend on food (see Figure 19). In London, York, Manchester and Edinburgh, spending in cafes, restaurants and takeaways accounts for more than a quarter of all spend. In Burnley and Birkenhead it is no more than £1 in every £20. And on average it is double the share in the largest city centres than it is in the smaller city centres surrounding them.

Figure 19: City centres with lower vacancy rates have higher spending shares on food

The relationship between high street vacancy and share of spend on food

Source: Fable Data; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

These patterns reflect recent shifts towards food. Figure 20 shows that in general stronger-performing city centre high streets have seen a greater shift in the share of their commercial space towards food and drink activities since 2010.

Figure 20: Stronger high streets have had a greater shift in commercial space towards food and drink

The relationship between high street vacancy and share of spend on food

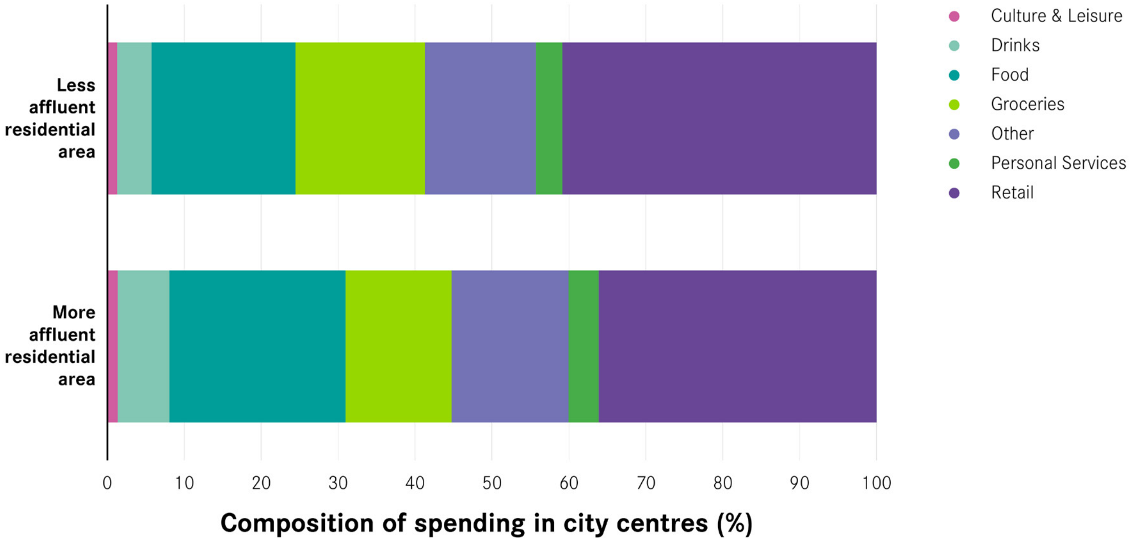
Source: Valuations Office Agency; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

The amount of money available to spend has driven this evolution. The rise of out of town and internet shopping has squeezed retail in city centres. In response, in areas where incomes are high, the private sector has pivoted towards what these alternatives do less well to provide – food and drink. Figure 21 shows that people from higher income areas[6] have larger shares of their city centre spend on food. This level of demand has allowed business to respond and shift the make up of amenities on offer in higher income places.

6 More affluent areas are defined as those in the top third of neighbourhoods with the highest incomes, and less affluent are those in the bottom third.

Figure 21: People from higher income areas spend a higher proportion of their city-centre spend on food and drink

City centre spending by affluence of different areas, 2024



Source: Fable Data; ONS

In places with lower incomes this demand is not as strong. This has meant that there has been much less incentive for the private sector to respond, and so large shares of commercial space in struggling city centres have remained in retail. By comparing the amount of city centre retail space per head of catchment population to vacancy rates, Figure 22 shows which city centres have the largest oversupply of retail (those in the top right) – places like Newport, Wigan and Middlesbrough have much higher amounts of retail space relative to their catchment size than Brighton and Milton Keynes. Box 6 discusses Newport in more detail.

Figure 22: Struggling city centre high streets have an oversupply of retail space

The relationship between city centre high street vacancies and retail space per head of catchment population, 2025

Source: Fable Data: Valuations Office Agency; ONS; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

Box 6: Vacancies in Newport

The centre of Newport has both the highest vacancy rate and the largest amount of retail space per head of catchment of any centre in this report. The local authority reports though that this has improved over the last year in particular. After having remained constant for around a decade, the vacancy rate has fallen by around 20 per cent, with much of the change the result of start ups taking up space. Footfall is up too – in the first quarter of this year, it was 10 per cent higher than in the first quarter of 2019.

The council recognises though that there is an oversupply of commercial space. Its challenge is to find a new use for space on peripheral streets in the centre and better match the size of its centre to the size of the city overall. It does also note though that when looking at occupancy rather than vacancy, its 400 occupied units puts it on par with Milton Keynes. This is something the oversupply of space masks.

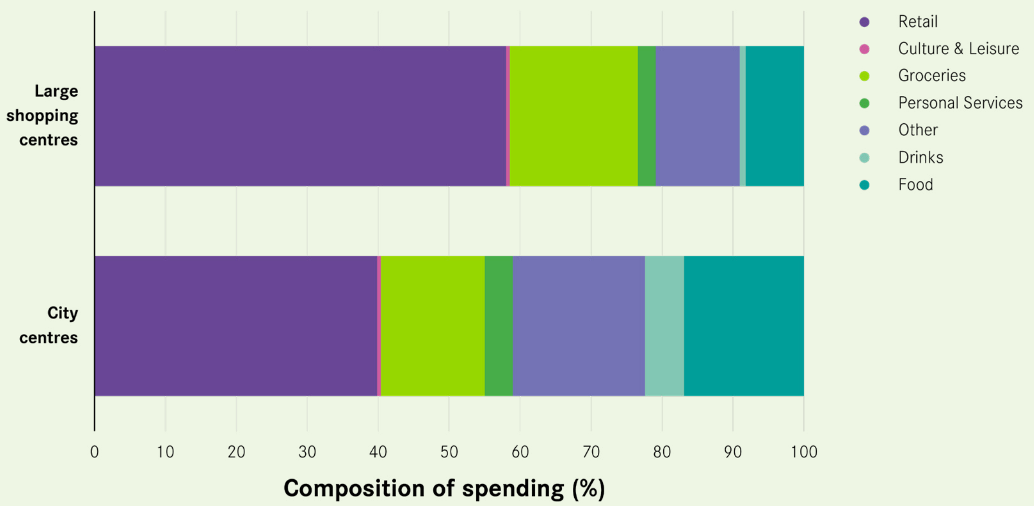
Box 7 sets out how the offer differs between city centres and large shopping centres, showing how the latter are much more retail focussed.

Box 7: Spending in large shopping centres

What people do in large shopping centres looks different to city centres. Figure 23 shows that there is a greater variety of spending in city centres, showing that they are more than just retail. In particular they have higher shares of spending on food and drink.

Figure 23: City centres have a higher diversity of spending than large shopping centres

The components of spending in large shopping centres compared to city centres



Source: Fable Data

Successful centres also have a larger 'premium' offer

Higher incomes also increase demand for 'premium' amenities, and this is reflected in the 'quality' of the high street offer. Figure 24 shows that those places with lower vacancies also have higher shares of 'premium' outlets (which is proxied by the share of retail spending on national 'premium' retail brands on their high streets).[7] The converse of this is that in struggling high streets those units that aren't empty are much more likely to be occupied by a 'budget' offering.[8] For example, around £1 in £3 spent in clothing, cosmetics or department stores in Leeds is in the shop of a premium national chain. In Huddersfield it is £1 in £40.

Figure 24: Centres with lower vacancies also have larger shares of spend on 'premium' activities

The relationship between city centre high street vacancies and share of retail spend on premium brands

Source: Fable Data; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data

Larger centres offer a wider variety of amenities

Larger catchments don't just mean more customers, but more customers with demand for a specific type of amenity. If a place has a rich but small catchment, while people have money to spend, there may not be many people who want to spend that money on Afghan food or ballet shoes, say. Without a critical mass of customers, an outlet selling either won't turn a profit. On the flip side, in a place with a large but poor catchment, the much larger absolute number of people who demand either of these things makes the business more viable even if average incomes are low.

7 The definition of premium retail brands was defined by looking at where average transaction spend in an outlet was at least half a standard deviation higher than the category average as a guide. Manual adjustments were then made to catch instances where this approach had clearly miscategorised a brand.

8 Previous work by Centre for Cities looked at budget amenities in more detail. See McDonald R, Ramuni L and Tan L (2019), What's in Store? How and why cities differ for consumers, London: Centre for Cities

Figure 25 illustrates this by showing the relationship between catchment size of city centre high streets and the number of different types of cuisine available in each. Places like London, Manchester and Birmingham have a wide range (despite lower incomes in the latter), while the opposite is the case in places like Newport and Birkenhead.

Figure 25: High streets with larger catchments provide a wider array of amenities

The relationship between catchment size and the number of cuisines available in city centre high streets

Source: Fable Data; ONS; Locomizer

Box 8 pulls the findings from this and the previous section together to look at how they play out in Sheffield.

Box 8: Sheffield City Centre case study

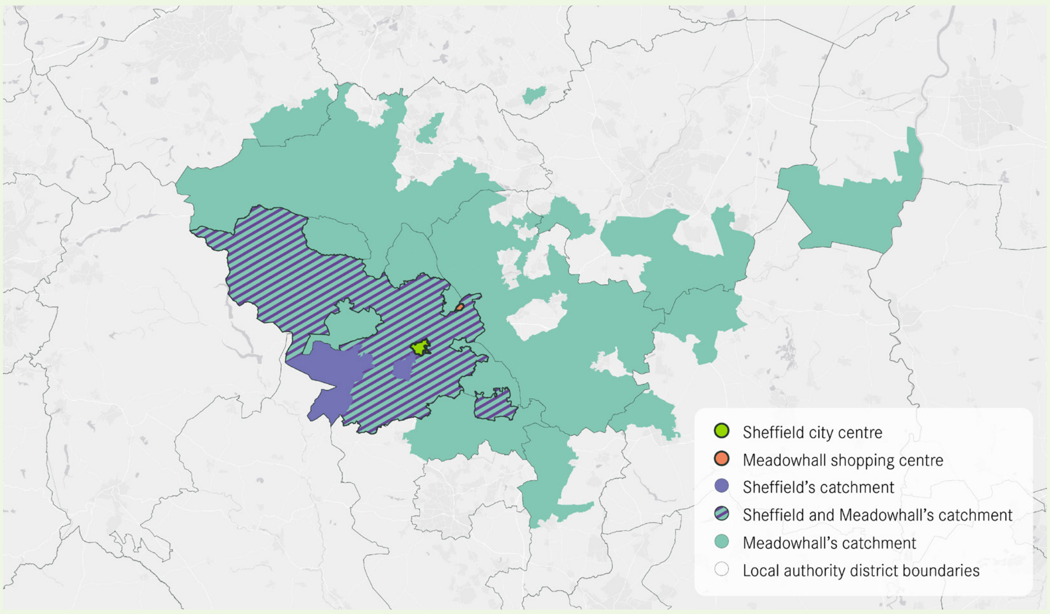
While Sheffield by no means has the highest vacancy rate of any city centre, it has the highest rate of any large city centre. Looking across the drivers of high street performance set out above shows why.

- It has a small catchment population. While it is the 6th largest city by population, it has the 18th largest catchment, and one that is less than half the size of Liverpool's. And its residents tend to spend less money in it – £1 in every £20 that residents of Sheffield spend on in-person spending is done in Sheffield city centre. This is mainly because of Meadowhall, the large out of town shopping mall that was developed on an enterprise zone site and opened in 1990. £1 in every £12 of resident spend is done here, and Meadowhall attracts around double the spend of the city centre. in contrast, Liverpool does not have an equivalent out-of-town shopping centre. In fact, its equivalent, Liverpool One (a large scale redevelopment undertaken in the 2000s), is in the city centre. Figure 26 shows how the catchment area of Meadowhall dwarfs that of Sheffield city centre.

- The average income of its catchment area is low too. Its catchment has the lowest average income of any of the large cities. For example, incomes were 10 per cent higher on average in Manchester city centre's catchment than Sheffield's.
- Its city centre economy doesn't perform as strongly as its peers. It has the smallest share of city centre jobs in high-skilled occupations of any large city centre. And office space takes up a smaller share of overall commercial space in the centre than in most other large cities. Around 2 in every 5 square metres of commercial floorspace is offices, compared to 3 in 5 in Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester.
- Visitor spend accounts for the smallest share of overall spend of any large city centre – visitors account for £1 in every £7 in Sheffield city centre, compared to £1 in every £5 on average in large cities.

These factors influence the performance and offer of the city centre. As well as having the highest estimated vacancy rate of its peer group, it has the lowest share of spending in food, the smallest premium offer, the lowest range of restaurants and the highest amount of retail space per head of catchment population compared to other large city centres. It also accounts for the lowest share of all spending in its region of any large centre – just 1.1 per cent of spend in Yorkshire, compared to Glasgow's 5 per cent share of Scottish spending.

Figure 26: Meadowhall's catchment area is far larger than Sheffield city centre's



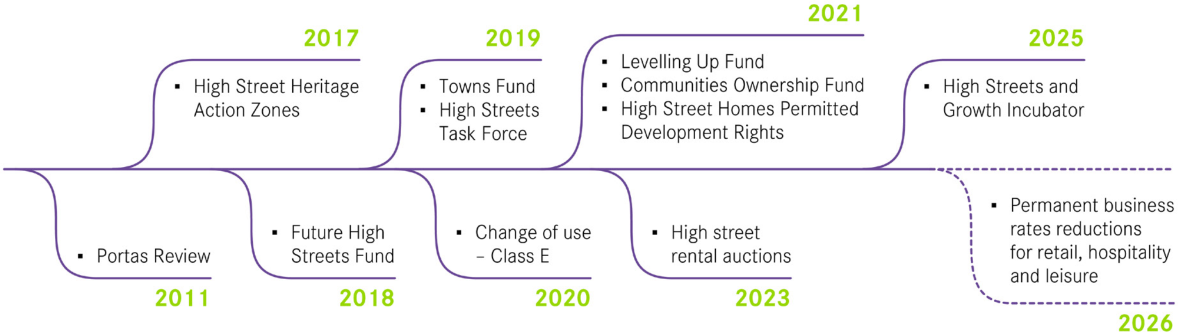
Source: Fable Data

04

Recent national policy approaches to the high street

The concerns of politicians about the fortunes of the high street are reflected in the long list of policies since 2010 they have put in place to attempt to support high streets that are struggling. Figure 27 sets out a timeline of national policies directly or indirectly targeted at the high street since 2010 (excluding special measures introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic), and this section provides commentary and analysis on the approaches taken.

Figure 27: A timeline of national policies directly or indirectly targeted at the high street since 2010 (excluding Covid-19 specific interventions)



Policy has struggled to diagnose the causes of the problem

For all of the policy that successive governments have put in place, few have identified and targeted the economy, and the city centre economy in particular, as the problem.

The 2010-15 Government's approach to the high street was shaped by the Portas Review (2011) that it commissioned. While there were many good ideas in the review, fundamentally it suffered from seeing the challenge to the high street coming only from out of town and online retail, rather than also being influenced by the fortunes of the local economy. And while not all recommendations in the review were retail specific, the framing of the problem in this way gives a strong sense that the recommendations were shaped with retail mainly in mind, rather than helping the high street to adapt to being less retail focussed. And there certainly weren't any recommendations on getting a greater share of the exporting economy into the centre – indeed jobs were mentioned only once.

More recent policy has diluted its focus on retail. Heritage and culture have been a more specific focus, for example through High Street Heritage Action Zones (2017) and the Communities Ownership Fund (2021). And some specific bids by local authorities into the many competitive funding pots that have been introduced in more recent years have broadened their focus beyond high street specific interventions to things like infrastructure. But there is still seemingly little understanding about the requirement to have a strong economy, and a strong city centre economy in particular, running through much of high street related policy.

There are of course exceptions. For example, while the 2010-15 Government reintroduced enterprise zones (many of which were out of town, compounding the challenges facing city centre high streets), Birmingham, Bristol and Liverpool put theirs in their city centres. But these were just 3 out of the original 24 created.[9] And UK economic policy continues to pay little regard for the role of city centres in the national economy, and the implications this has for the performance of high streets.

There is potential for specific high street policies to have an impact. But they need to be underpinned by a strong economy if they are to work.

There continues to be a number of distracting red herrings in policy thinking

Two complaints that featured in the Portas Review and are frequently raised in discussions about the high street are free parking and business rates. This is intuitive – out of town leisure tend to have free parking and tend to pay lower business rates per square metre. Both though don't hold up to deeper scrutiny.

The Government should reform the business rates system. Centre for Cities has previously set out what this large-scale reform should look like.[10] But this reform would do very little to ease the challenges faced by struggling high streets.

This is because businesses on struggling city centre high streets either pay lower business rates than successful ones, or pay nothing at all (see Figure 28). In the current system businesses operating from properties under a certain threshold are exempted from rates.[11] For example, in Bradford and Blackpool, two of the city centre high streets with the highest vacancy rates, two thirds of properties are below this threshold.[12] Meanwhile Milton Keynes and Cambridge, two strong performers, have some of the lowest shares of high street properties under this threshold (6 per cent and 7 per cent respectively).

9 Swinney P and Piazza G (2019), In the zone? Have enterprise zones delivered the jobs they promised? London: Centre for Cities

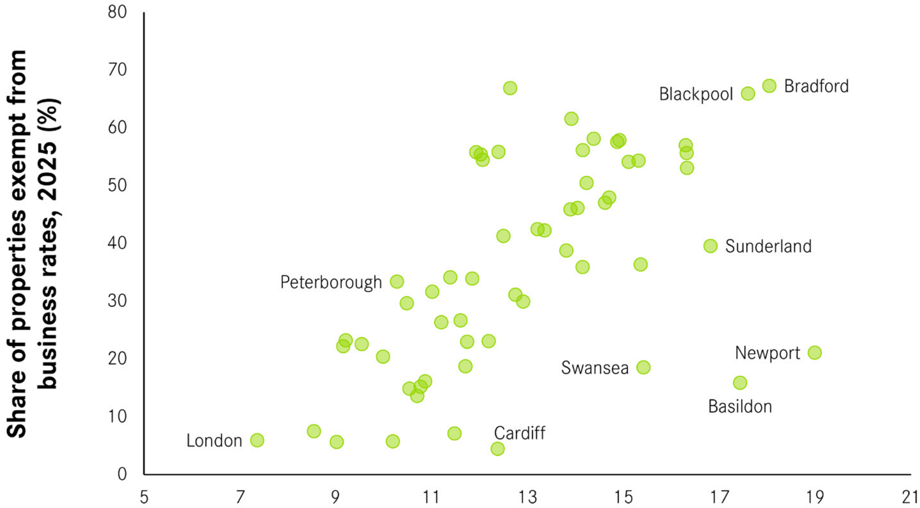
10 Enenkel K, Aubrey T and Sells T (2020), Reforming business rates: Fixing a broken system, London: Centre for Cities

11 In England this threshold is a rateable value of £12,000. In Wales it is £6,000.

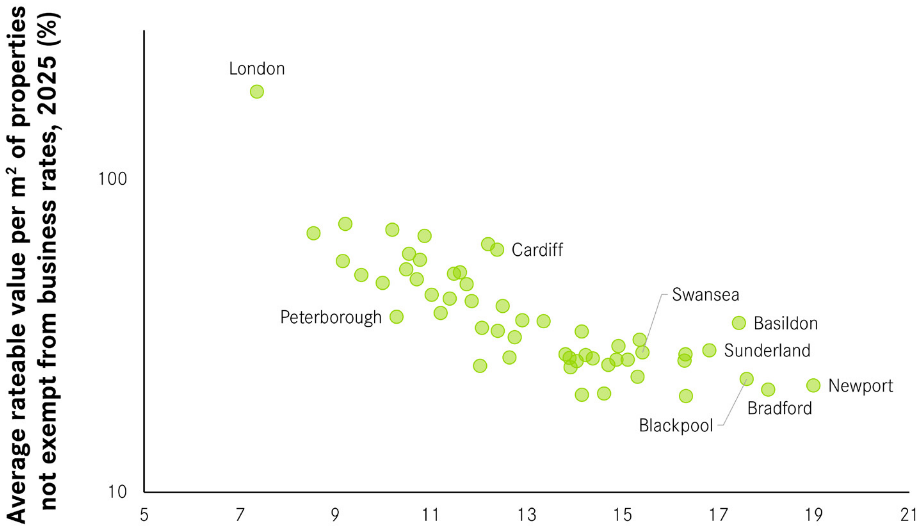
12 Some properties under this threshold will still pay business rates if they are occupied by a company with more than one outlet.

Figure 28: City centres with the weakest high streets have some of the lowest business rates and highest shares of properties that are exempt from paying them

The relationship between high street vacancy and properties exempt from business rates



The relationship between high street vacancy and rateable value per m² of properties not exempt from business rates



Source: VOA; Individual local authority business rates data; Centre for Cities calculations from Local Data Company data
Note: Data is for England and Wales only. Welsh city centres have much smaller shares of exempt properties because the threshold in Wales is £6,000 rather than £12,000 in England.

Instead of reforming the system, recent announcements have further distorted it. The introduction of full business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was understandable, but has proved difficult to remove. Given these difficulties, the Chancellor announced in last Autumn's Budget that she will introduce a permanently lower rate for retail, hospitality and leisure from 2026/27 to 'level the playing field for the high street'.[13]

13 See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/42024-autumn-budget-2024-business-rates-measures/42024-autumn-budget-2024-business-rates-measures#:~:text=The%20Chancellor%20also%20announced%20that,%C2%A3500%2C000%20from%202026%2F27.

While the politics are obvious, the claim of creating a level playing field for the high street is more dubious for a number of reasons. Firstly, the discount will apply to those outlets on retail parks as it will those on the high street. Secondly, one of the many problems of the business rates system is that, unlike VAT say, it has to generate a fixed amount of money. So a reduction for one business requires an increase elsewhere. In this instance it is businesses in properties with a rateable value over £500,000 that will cover the shortfall. So large properties in successful city centres, particularly in central London (which is home to 8 per cent of these properties alone), will pay to cover the rate reductions for out of town retail, leisure and hospitality.

The challenge in struggling centres is not primarily business rates or parking charges (note the low vacancy rates in central London despite the cost of parking[14]), but the strength of the economy. Changes to either are unlikely to reverse their fortunes. Indeed, a more efficient business rates system would abolish exemptions, meaning that many high street businesses in these places would have to start paying business rates.

Greater flexibility in planning is welcome, but it won’t deal with underlying challenges in struggling areas

A trend more recently in the approach to the high street has been to introduce more flexibility into the planning system, and force change where it isn’t happening. This has happened through the creation of the New Class E planning category, permitted development rights and High Street Rental Auctions.

Broadly these attempts to facilitate change are welcome. This is especially the case for the **Class E planning category**, which puts a range of high street uses, such as shops, restaurants and healthcare clinics into the same category so that a change of use does not require planning consent.

In principle the recent introduction of **High Street Rental Auctions** are a good idea too. In places with high vacancy rates where a landlord is not cooperating, a local authority now has the power to force a premises to go to auction to be rented out. The aim of this process is that the auction will find the true market rental value, rather than the one that the landlord may be holding out for. A downside to it is that once a council has identified an area to apply the policy to, it can take up to half a year to auction the property, and there is an administrative burden to go through. That said, if the threat of auction acts as a ‘stick’ to bring about cooperation then it may be that the policy strengthens a local authority’s bargaining position with an uncooperative landlord.

Permitted development, on the other hand, may pose more of a challenge in city centres. This policy allows commercial space to change to residential without planning consent. But it is likely to bite in high demand rather than low demand city centres. If demand is weak to open a shop or a café, then demand to live in that area tends be low too, and so the policy has little impact. Conversely, high demand for commercial and residential space overlaps too. The risk in these city centres is that residential space outcompetes commercial, and the local authority has no ability to manage it even if this squeezes the supply of office space. Given

14 At the time of writing, parkopedia.co.uk lists parking in the multi-storey car park behind Selfridges on Oxford Street as £9 per hour.

the particular role city centres play in city economies, any squeezing of office space could cause a problem for future economic performance.[15] It is this reason that some authorities have been granted an Article 4 direction, exempting them from permitted development applications in their city centres.

15 McDonald R and Bessis H (2018), City Space Race: Balancing the need for housing and office space in cities, London: Centre for Cities

05

What needs to change

So what does this mean for policy? This final section sets out what guiding principles policymakers should use in their approach to improving high streets, and gives specific recommendations on what they should so.

Guiding principles

When looking to make an intervention on the high street, any set of policies needs to reflect on these two principles:

- Form all policies towards high streets in the context of broader economic policy. A focus on the former without intervention on the latter will bring about little change to the fortunes of the high street. The performance of the high street is a symptom of wider economic challenges, not the cause of it.
- Tailor the approach to what is achievable given the role the high street plays in the regional consumption economy. The offer that a large city or a smaller city without any neighbouring rival centres of consumption will be able to offer will be different to one located close to a large centre in particular.

Policy recommendations

To make struggling city centres better places to do business:

- **The Government should designate city centres as critical infrastructure alongside more 'traditional' types of infrastructure** so that they are accounted for in infrastructure investment decisions.
- **The Government should allocate £5 billion of its planned £113 billion capital investment programme to spend on improving the performance of city centres:**
  - The money should focus on remodelling city centres to remove surplus space, improve the public realm and build new office space. The latter will require

  an assessment of what new office space is needed, for example in terms of flexibility, floorplate size and age. All places should consider having at least one Grade A office space empty and ready to occupy so that provision can meet any incoming demand.

  - It should be a mix of grant and loan. Grant will be required to derisk some projects and undertake others (there is no financial return to knocking buildings down for example), and the larger the struggles of a city centre, the higher the share of funding that will need to be in the form of grant.
  - Any city that receives such funding should have a city centre strategy in place which sets out what the intervention is trying to achieve, which projects it aims to deliver and which phases they will be delivered in, so that any one intervention is part of a wider plan. This requirement is in line with the forthcoming requirement in the Green Book for every project to have a place-based business case to assess how it interacts with other projects.

- **In mayoral areas, mayors should allocate part of their Mayoral Recyclable Growth Funds on city centre regeneration, and combine this with the new High Streets and Growth Incubator and the Strategic Sites Accelerator funding,** which is designed to bring development forward on important but challenging sites.
- **Local government should use Local Development Orders (LDOs) to simplify planning in city centres.** LDOs are mini local plans that automatically grant either outline or full planning consents to proposals that comply with the Order. Local authorities rarely use LDOs because of lack of familiarity and the effort required to design an LDO. MHCLG could reduce the workload for local authorities by creating "template" LDOs that provide planning rules conducive for urban regeneration.
- **Local and national government should consolidate public functions into the centre.** Where possible, local and national government should move public offices and services into city centres, as is happening with the new Government Hub on the fringe of York city centre or the move of part of Sunderland City College and eye hospital into the city's core (see Box 9), for example.
- **National governments should apply Article 4 directions in every city centre** to exempt them from permitted development, so giving local authorities more control over the management of space in the centre. To meet housing targets this will mean that the local authorities must continue to supply residential space in other parts of the city to meet demand.
- **The UK Government should reform the business rates system, but the reform's aim must be to improve the working of the system rather than to 'save the high street'.** Previous Centre for Cities' work has set out what a reformed system should look like, with annual revaluations of properties and the removal of the cap on how much the system can raise being key parts of this. This reform would likely do little to improve the high streets of struggling city centres given that large

shares of properties are already exempt from rates. Shaping it in terms of the high street will likely distort an already distorted system even further.

- Business Improvement Districts should continue with the work they have done in recent years with the ongoing support of local authorities and the police to address issues around cleanliness and safety and the provision of events. What they can achieve though will be constrained by the economic context they find themselves in and the extent to which other bodies act upon the recommendations above.

To increase the size of the catchment of a city centre high street:

- Local government should increase the number of people living within the existing catchment **by increasing housing density,** particularly in the city centre or inner-city areas where there is demand for this type of living. Councils that have been given money through the Brownfield Land Release Fund should use this to bring forward land for development in these areas. And they should work with institutional investors to develop housing, with the involvement of the latter giving a steer on demand for inner city living in any given city.

To increase the number of visitors:

- Local government should use the newly formed Local Visitor Enterprise Partnerships - collaborations between public and private sector organisations to develop and promote tourism in their area – to make the most out of what a city has. But places should reflect on how much resource this is likely to take up, particularly in cities where their city centres struggle to attract even their own residents in, suggesting problems won't be solved by promoting a 'visitor offer'.

Sunderland is already putting many of these recommendations into practice, which Box 9 summarises.

Box 9: Sunderland's approach to city centre redevelopment

Local government, the private sector and the third sector are in the process of using a number of the recommendations above to improve the performance of Sunderland city centre:

Strategy: The Riverside Sunderland strategy, first launched in 2020, sets out what Sunderland City Council is trying to achieve. And it is set out over a number of phases, to show the staging and timing of different parts of the strategy to be able to clearly articulate what it is trying to do when. While not everything below has happened as a result of the strategy, much has been conceived within it ensuring clarity of purpose in creating new places and reinforcing old.

Sources of finance: Sunderland City Council has partnered with a number of private sector partners including Legal & General, Canada Life and PlaceFirst Limited, and has combined this with the authority's own funds, investment from Homes England and successful bids to central government including the Future High Streets Fund and the Heritage Action Zones initiative.

Office development: The current plan is to develop 1 million square feet of grade A office to establish a new central business district. To date 450,000 sq ft has been constructed, some in conjunction with Legal and General. So far companies such as Ocado and the Ambassador Theatre Group have taken up space, and the authority expects to make further announcements soon.

Public sector moves: The development of the office district has been supported by building a new City Hall, with the local authority moving its functions from city wide sites including its former HQ elsewhere in the city centre. Part of the activities of the City of Sunderland College have been brought into the centre, the NHS is supporting the regeneration with a large scale investment in a new eye hospital (replacing one in the suburbs), and the University of Sunderland, the Department of Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice are also taking up space.

Public realm: At the beginning of the works the local authority straightened out the road running through it to create space to build a new public square which much of the new development faces on to. Keel Crossing, a new footbridge over the River Wear which links the city centre developments to the Sheepfolds housing development and Stadium of Light, will open this summer.

Amenity provision: Separate to the local authority (although supported by it) is the development of the 500 seater Fire Station auditorium (primarily funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England) and the restoring of a number of Edwardian buildings surrounding it. The council has also brought forward the development of a new hotel, bars and a restaurant on Keel Square, and has used the Future High Streets Fund to build its new £40 million Culture House (an arts, education and performance centre) on the square too.

Housing: There are five separate housing sites in various stages of development as part of the strategy. One is on the land of the former Civic Centre. Two are in or close to the new office developments. And the final one is on the opposite side of the new Keel Crossing at Sheepfolds, creating a new inner city neighbourhood on the site of light industrial activities. They will deliver 1,200 new homes.

Council capabilities: To undertake the scale of this development the Council established its City Development function. This brought together all skills associated with investment and regeneration including all regulatory services including highways and planning. It also recruited largely from the private sector to staff its Investment delivery teams.

Land assembly and demolition: The council's assembly programme started in 2011 and intensified in 2019, bringing over 40 units under local authority control. As part of this it has demolished a number of low-quality, redundant buildings where necessary alongside bringing buildings seen as having historical and architectural value back into use, alongside the new construction that is under way.

Business Improvement District: Sunderland BID has operated in the city centre since 2014 and has recently expanded to cover the area where the Keel Crossing lands on the north bank of the river to reflect recent redevelopment. It has three workstreams of city pride (focussing on cleanliness and safety), city voice (representing businesses in the BID) and city promotion (doing marketing and events activities).

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