

THE COURIER

Dundee

Matters

A Courier report into the health
of our high street.

Lesley-Anne Kelly
Head of Data Journalism
DC Thomson

Ema Sabljak
Data Journalist
DC Thomson

Emma Morrice
Data Journalist
DC Thomson

Paul Malik
Business Journalist
DC Thomson

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Introduction

The future of Dundee matters to The Courier.

For more than 200 years now we've been shining a light on the pressing issues in the City of Discovery and have used our reporting to push for change.

The perfect storm of the pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, inflationary pressures, and online shopping have led to a wave of city centre businesses pulling their shutters down.

This situation is not unique to Dundee, but that does not mean we, as a city, should simply accept this trajectory.

And nor will The Courier stop highlighting these issues on our other high-streets.

Our data team has been tracking the changing shape of our high streets and shopping centres since June 2023.

Now, we no longer want to simply track the data – we want to change it.

We're asking our readers to share their views on the high street – on their high street.

What do they want to see more of, less of?

What brings them into town, what keeps them away?

What do you think our streets need to bring them back to life again?

To make them the focal point of activity, the social hub and the vibrant, beating, heart of our city they once were.

When heard, our shared ideas can help shape the future of Dundee.

In May, we hosted a High Street Summit in our offices in Dundee. Bringing together a panel of experts in high street regeneration, local business people, and representatives from the local council and chamber of commerce.

An audience of invited guests was made up of engaged readers, local business owners and changemakers with a vested interest in seeing positive growth in Dundee city centre.

You can read more about the discussion held at the event and the outcomes in this paper.

Methodology of the High Street Tracking project

All data for the Dundee high street tracker is collected manually. Each unit included in the high street map was drawn out by the data team using online software by cross referencing the building shapes with the number of units that occupied the space.

For the shopping centres, floor plans were obtained and used to draw out individual units.

Once the maps were drawn, the data team got out on foot to carry out a full census of every street and centre in order to determine which were occupied and which were vacant.

Vacant units were then checked to see what was previously in that space and when it closed, using a mixture of newspaper articles, archives, Google Maps, other various sources such as review websites, as well as utilising local knowledge. As a result, dates given for unit closures are an estimate, based on the best information we have.

The first census in Dundee was carried out in May and June 2023, the second in November 2023 and the third in March 2024.

We continue to carry out full on foot censuses every quarter, while also doing smaller walk rounds every so often to check units. Any units opening and closing are updated as and when we find out about them. Information is gathered through a mixture of being made aware of new openings or closures by reporters, by spotting them in person, and also via a form that members of the public can fill in to help us keep the trackers up to date.

In Dundee, we track 362 retail spaces across eleven high street areas and a further 128 units in the Overgate and Wellgate shopping centres. Making a total of 490 retail properties tracked in the city.

Our data covers Castle Street, Commercial Street, Crichton Street, Exchange Street, High Street (including City Square), Murraygate, Nethergate, Perth Road, Reform Street, Union Street and Whitehall Street.

First census results

The first on foot census of Dundee was completed in May and June of 2023.

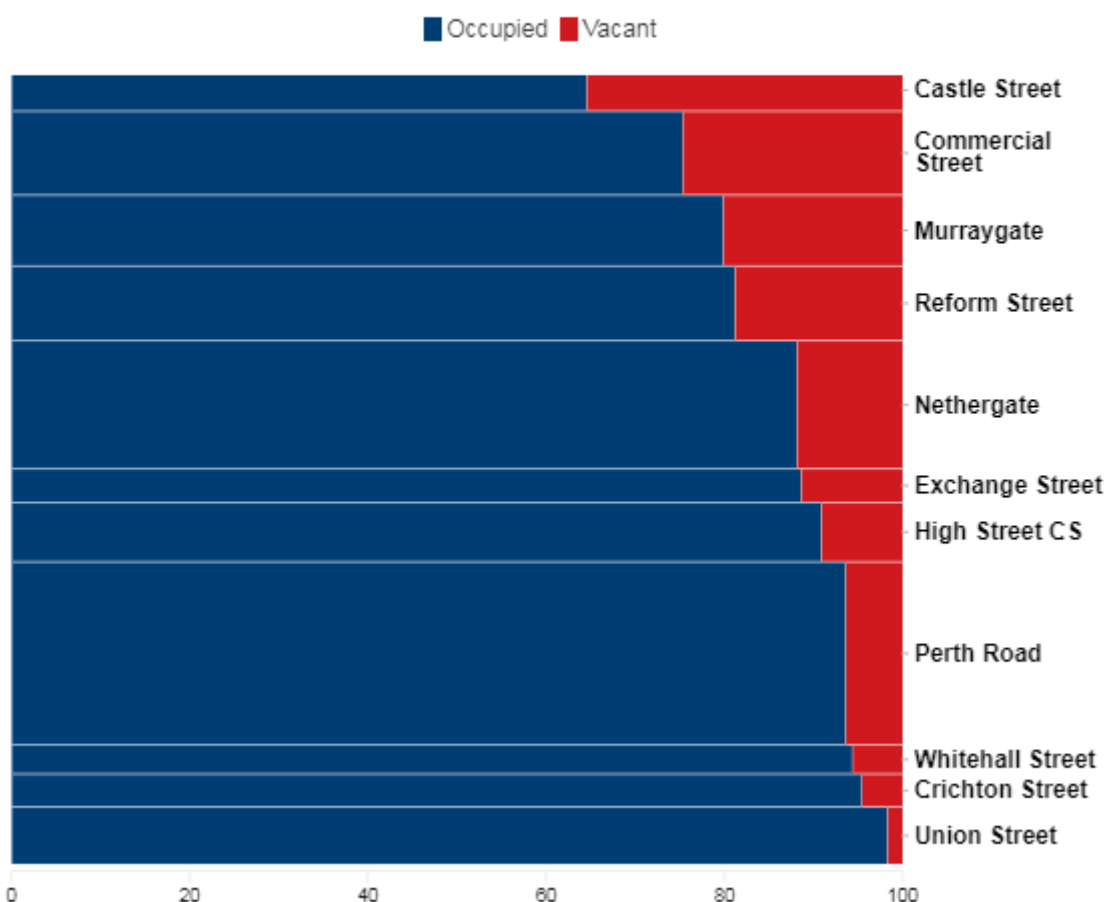
At that time the high street areas had an overall vacancy rate of 15.5%, whereas the shopping centre vacancy rate sat at just under a third (28.3%).

Across the City of Discovery, the tracker monitors eleven key high street areas as well as the two main shopping centres.

Of the individual streets, Castle Street had the highest vacancy rate at 36.3% and Union Street was the most successful in terms of occupancy, with only 3.8% of units unoccupied.

Union Street has the highest occupancy rate of the Dundee high streets

Chart shows the proportion of units in each high street that are occupied and vacant. Bar widths denote the total number of units in each street - the wider the bar the more total units on that street.

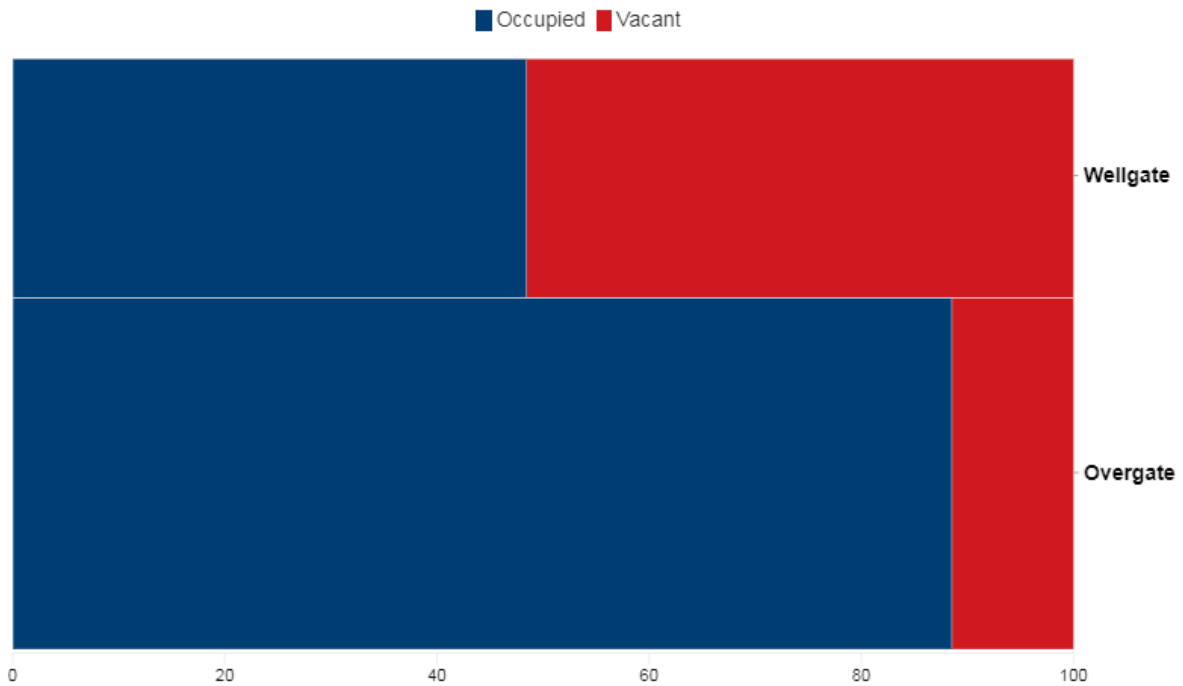


Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on a June 2023 snapshot

There was huge variation in vacancy for the shopping centres – with the Overgate sitting at a rate of 12% vacancy, whereas the Wellgate centre had more than half of its units unoccupied (55.8%).

More than half of the units in the Wellgate are vacant

Chart shows the proportion of units in each shopping centre that are occupied and vacant. Bar widths denote the total number of units in each centre - the wider the bar the more total units in that centre..



Source: Dc Thomson high street trackers • Based on June 2023 snapshot

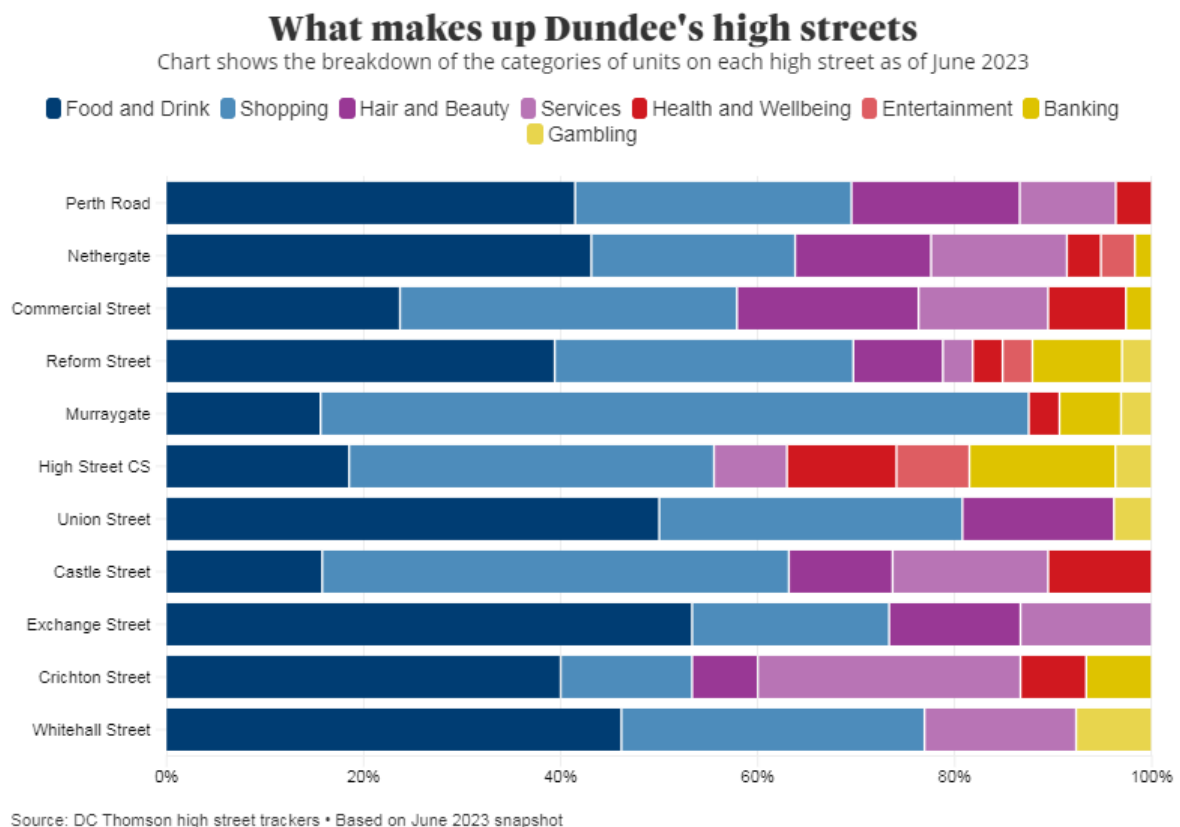
Food and drink outshined shopping units on the high streets making up 35.3% and 32.5% respectively across both vacant and occupied units.

Hair and beauty (11.4%) was the next most popular category across more than 360 units.



Over half of Exchange Street was geared towards food and drink (53.33%) followed by Union Street at 50%.

With almost three quarters of units filled by shops (71.9%), Murraygate had the highest proportion of the unit type. It is bottom for the percentage of food and drink options (15.6%).



The shopping centres, unsurprisingly, are mainly filled with shopping units.

From both the occupied and vacant units for which the former occupier was known, 69.3% of them were shops in the Overgate.

But less than half of the units were shops in the Wellgate (44.2%).

The second most popular category in the Overgate is food and drink but services were second for the Wellgate (accounting for 19.2% of units).

Broken down further, restaurants and cafes emerged as the most popular subcategory across the streets and centres.

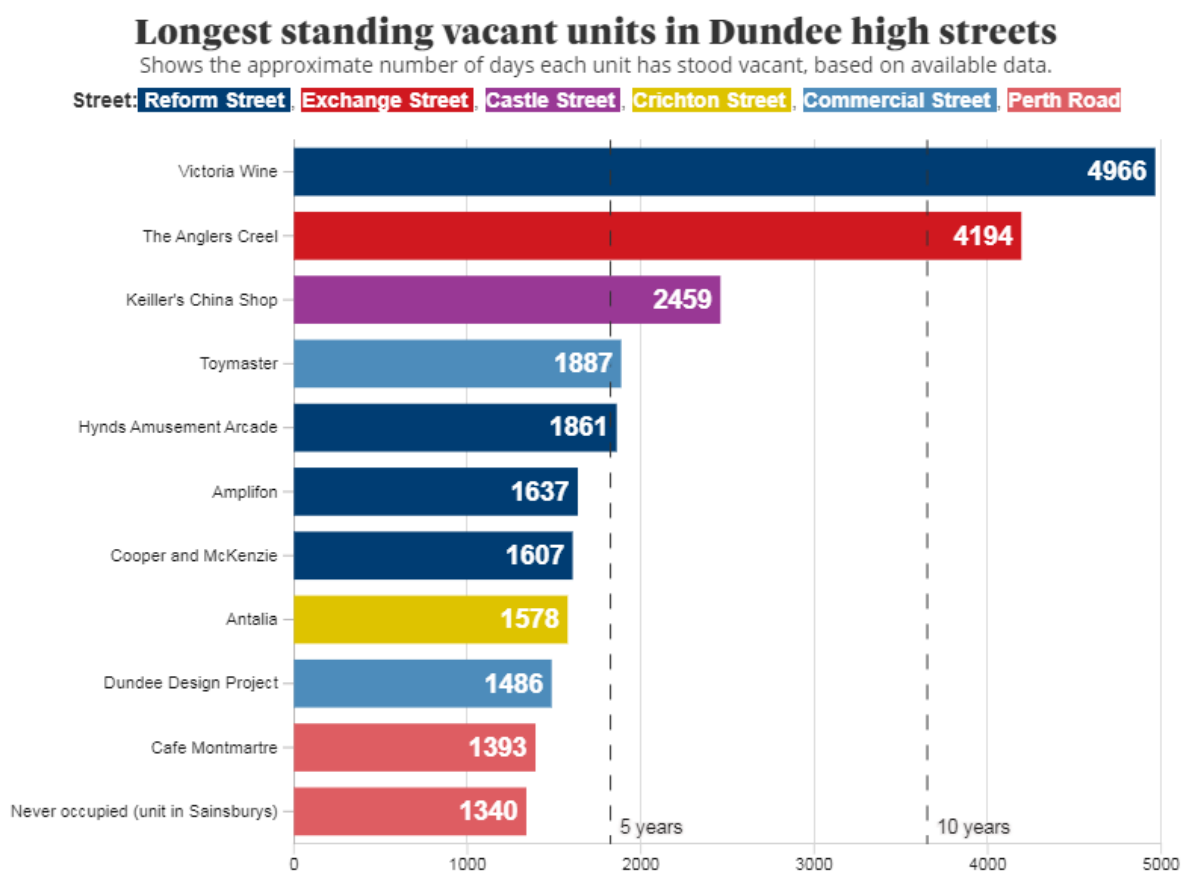
It was followed by clothes shops and other shops. Charity shops also made the top ten-unit types by subcategory. There were 13 in Dundee at the time.

Since the project began, we have also been tracking how long units have been left empty.

For units that shut before the project, the process included checking social media, archive reporting and Companies House for any indication of the closure date.

Of the properties we could date, the former Victoria Wine on Reform Street was the longest standing empty unit in June 2023. At the time, it had been unoccupied for 4,996 days or around 13 and half years.

This was closely followed by the former Angler’s Creel fishing supply shop on Exchange Street, which has sat vacant for approximately 4,194 days – or almost 11 and a half years. Its storefront was one of only two vacant units on the street.



Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on June 2023 snapshot

The shopping centres fared much better in terms of turning around vacant units, with neither centre having a unit vacant longer than 1,500 days as of June 2023.

The oldest vacant unit in the Overgate was the old Hawkin’s Bazaar unit, which had been lying vacant for approximately 1,243 days (roughly 3.3 years).

Despite the disparities in vacancy rates, the Wellgate’s longest standing empty unit was their old McDonald’s premises on the ground floor, which at the time was empty for 1,394 days (3.8 years).

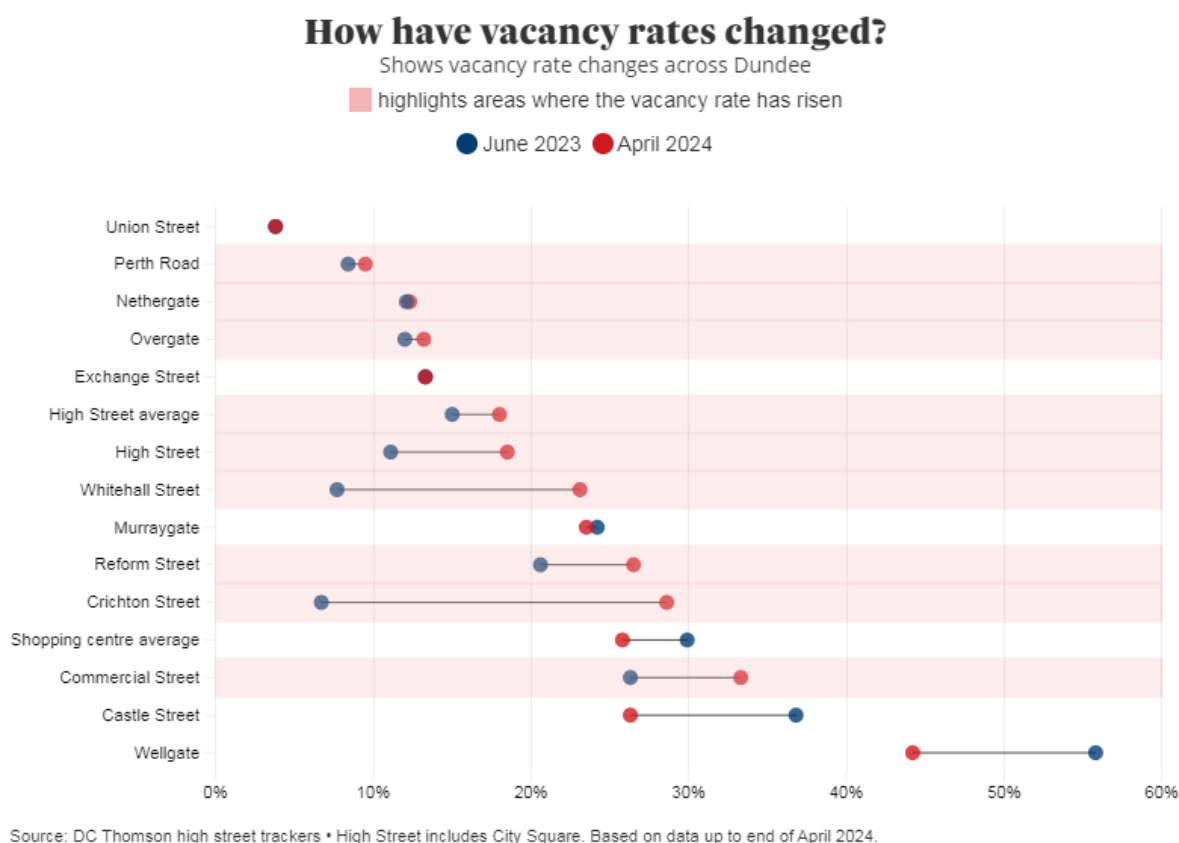
Has the vacancy situation got any better since we started tracking it?

Almost a year of tracking later, it is clear change is unavoidable on our high streets.

Dundee saw 41 vacant units become occupied while 29 businesses shut their doors permanently from June 2023 up to April 2024.

An additional four changed their occupier immediately without a period of vacancy.

Overall, the high street average vacancy rate has increased by 2.5 percentage points up to 18%. But positively, the shopping centre rate fell in the period to 25.8%. This was largely down to improvements in occupancy in the Wellgate, with the vacancy rate dropping below 50% in February.



While there are fluctuations month on month, the changes in the vacancy rates from June 2023 to April 2024 paint a stark picture.

Only the Wellgate, Castle Street and Murraygate had a lower rate of empty units in April this year. Exchange Street and Union Street had the same rate almost a year on.

The remaining streets had more vacant units this year than in June 2023.

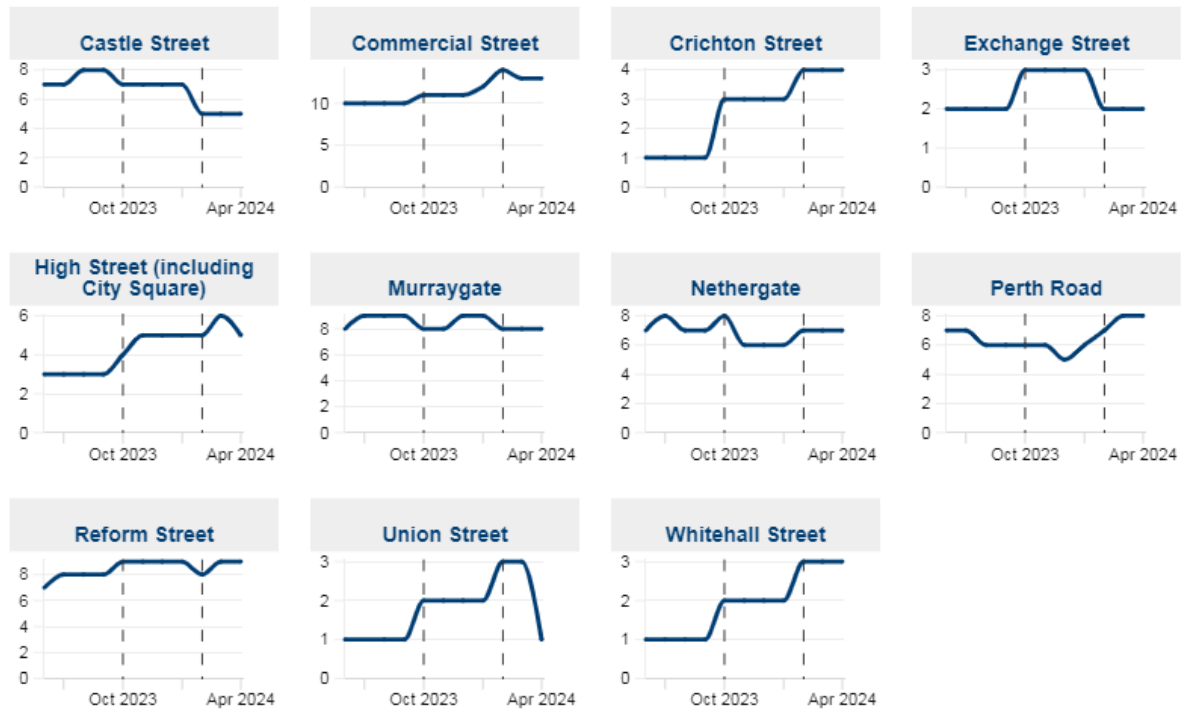
The biggest percentage point increase was seen on Crichton Street but it also has the second least number of units so just a few closures can have a big impact on the rate.

The changes also mean that Commercial Street surpassed Castle Street as Dundee’s most vacant street.

Union Street, on the other hand, had only one empty shop from 26 units, meaning it was only 3.8% vacant in both April 2024 and June 2023.

Most streets see regular changes

The number of vacant units by street from June 2023 to April 2024 and the censuses marked in a dashed line



Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on data up to the end of April 2024

During the time we have tracked it, the highest number of empty premises on the street was three in February and March.

Most streets saw dips and rises in the number of vacant units, but Crichton Street and Whitehall Street have seen a steady rise.

In the shopping centres, the Overgate fluctuated between eight and ten vacant units throughout the period.

The Wellgate has seen a steady decline from 29 empty units down to 24.



What about the long-term vacant units?

Only two of the longest-standing empty units on the high streets opened since we have been tracking the information.

The former Dundee Design Project on Commercial Street reopened its doors as Thrift City at the start of March.

The unit on 91 Perth Road, which had been empty for more than four years, was taken over in May by a new cafe named Eastfield.

The Overgate had only three units empty for more than a year- spaces formerly filled by Hawkins Bazaar, Debenhams and Scentsational. It has seen some changes in the units which have been empty for less than a year such as the Paperchase premises being taken over by Pandora.

Where Dundee sits in the four cities

We are now tracking almost 2,000 high street and shopping centre units across half of Scotland's eight official cities.

There may be three Union Streets and three High Streets across the four cities, but each has a distinct profile.

So how does Dundee compare to Aberdeen, Inverness and Perth?

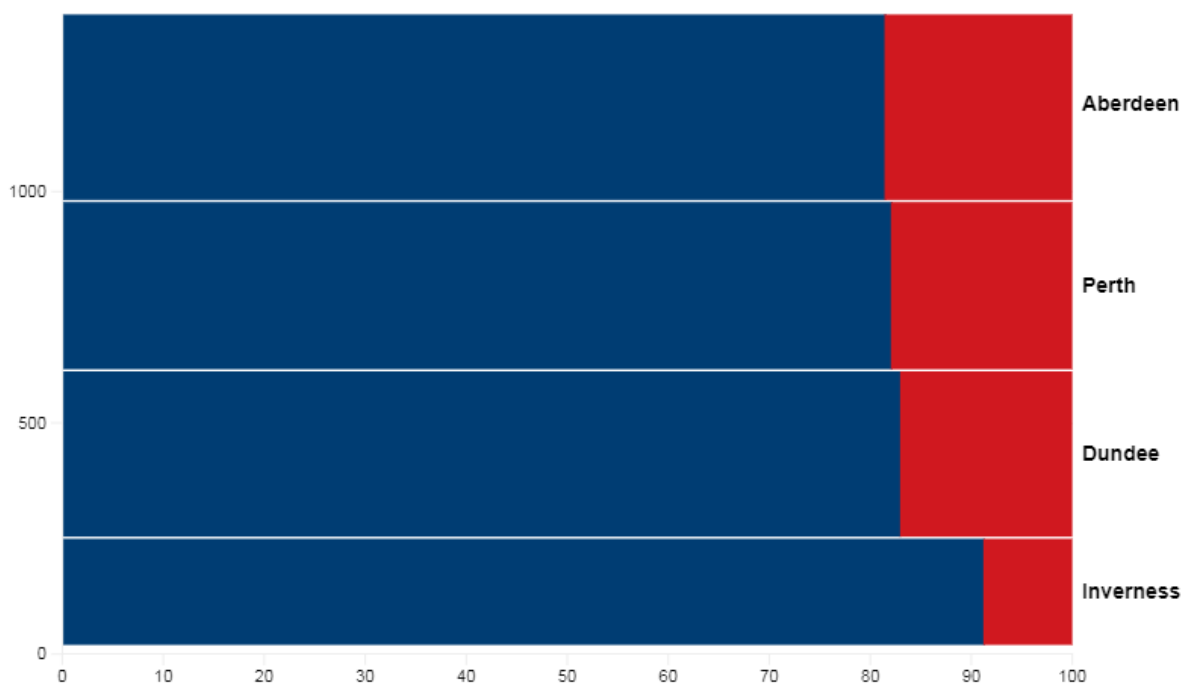
Vacancy

Dundee has a lower vacancy rate across its high streets than Aberdeen and Perth.

The City of Discovery was 18% empty across the tracked streets as of April 15, while the others were at 19.5 and 18.9% respectively. However, it is still significantly higher than Inverness at 9.8%.

How do the four cities stack up?

Chart shows the proportion of high street units in each city that are **occupied** and **vacant**. Bar widths denote the total number of units in each city - the wider the bar the more total units are tracked in that city.

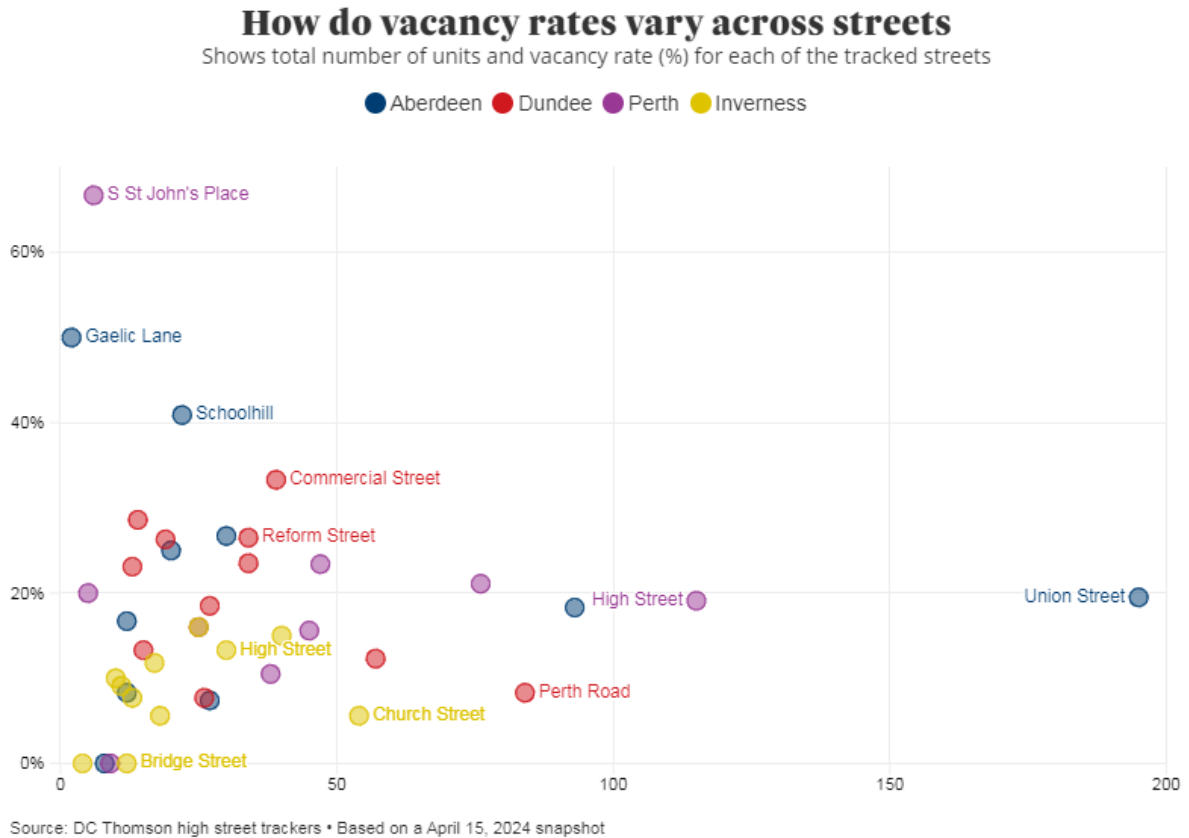


Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on a April 15, 2024 snapshot

Perth and Dundee had the same number of occupied units in our tracker when the analysis was carried out, but Perth had four additional vacant units.

The higher vacancy rates now fall in order of the number of tracked units.

In terms of the streets themselves, there is more variation from that trend. Perth’s South St John’s Place has the highest vacancy rate at 66.7% with six tracked units. But other small streets like Aberdeen’s Little Belmont Street or Inverness’ Rose Street have no vacant units at all.



Both Perth’s and Aberdeen’s longest tracked streets (115 units and 195 units respectively) are just under a fifth vacant.

But Dundee’s Perth Road, which has the most tracked units in the city, is only 8.3% vacant. That is the city’s second least vacant street after Union Street which is 7.7% empty.

Six out of 11 of Dundee’s high streets have a vacancy between 20% and Commercial Street’s 33.3%. Aberdeen, Perth and Inverness all have less than half of their streets above 20%.

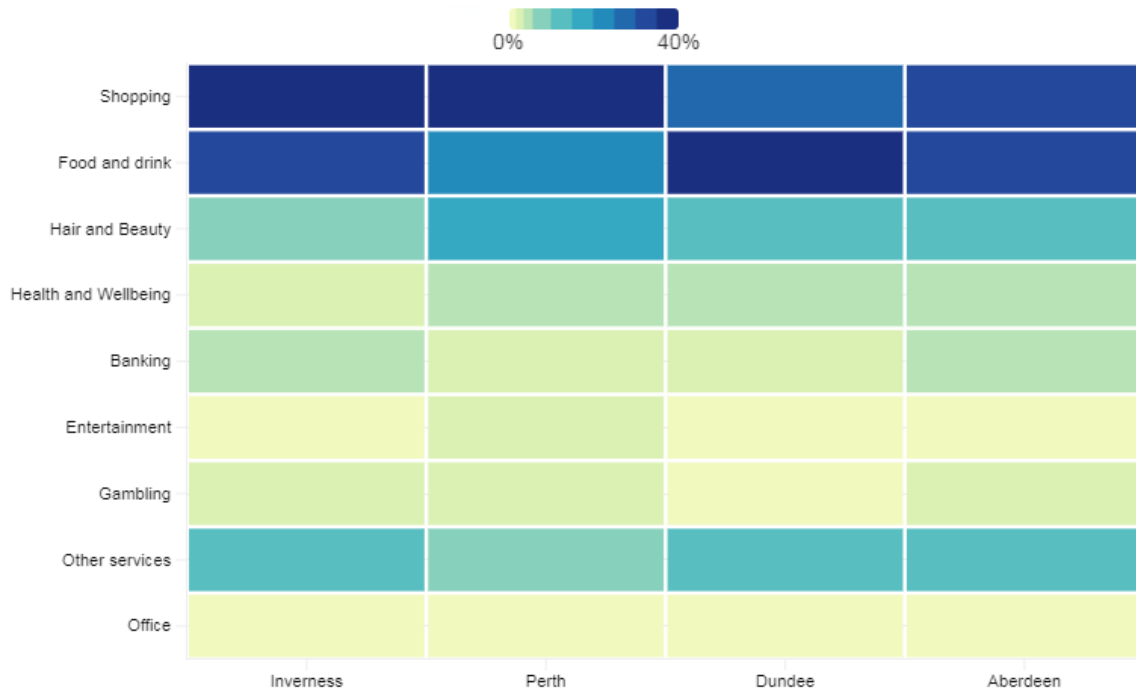
Categories

Food and drink is the most popular category across the occupied businesses in Dundee at 36.49%.

Aberdeen has the highest proportion of food and drink units, followed by shopping. Meanwhile, the two smaller cities both have shopping as the most popular category of filled units.

The profile of our high streets

Heatmap shows breakdown of each city's occupied high street properties by category



Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on a April 15, 2024 snapshot

Shopping is the second most popular category in Dundee, but the city also has the lowest proportion of the unit type from all the cities. It is the only place where shopping makes up below 30% of the filled premises.

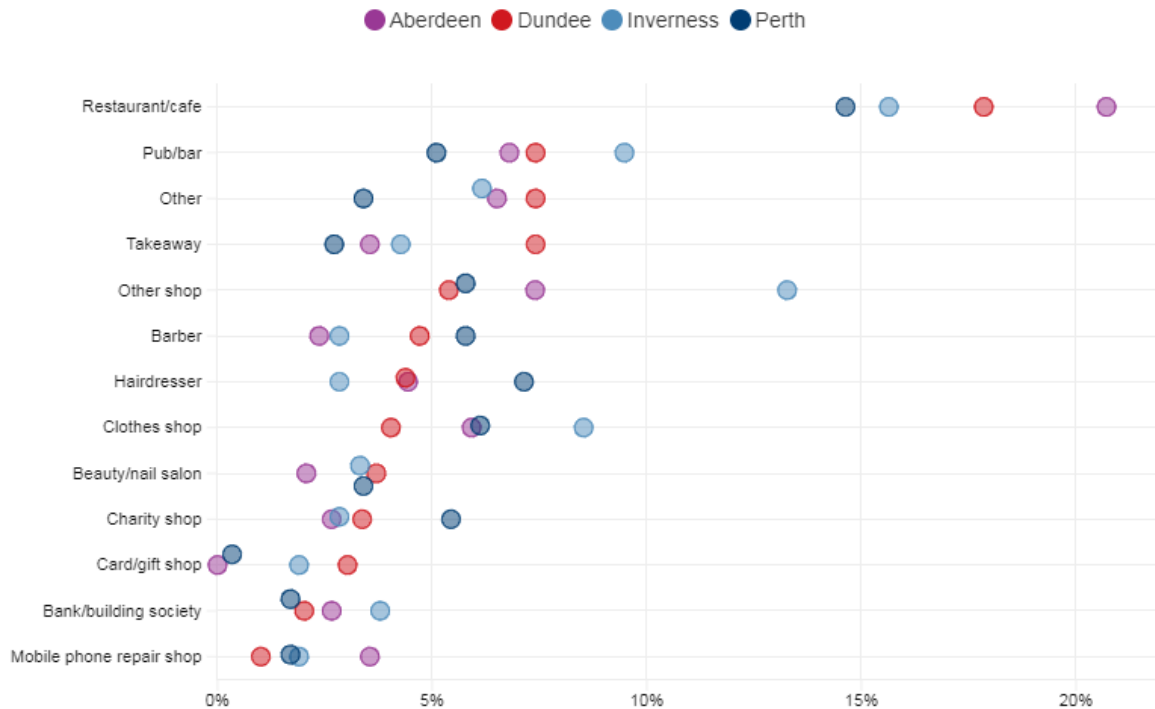
Perth is the only of the four cities where the proportion of banking units doesn't surpass entertainment.

Subcategories

Further differences emerge when looking at the subcategories of occupied units. While both Dundee and Aberdeen had the highest proportion of food and drink premises, the Granite City had more restaurants and cafes at 20.71%.

What type of businesses thrive on the high streets

Shows proportion of each city's occupied high street units broken down by subcategory



Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on a April 15, 2014 snapshot

Restaurants and cafes made up 17.85% of Dundee's filled offering - still ahead of Perth and Inverness. It also had a higher percentage of takeaway than other cities at 7.41%.

Dundee had more pubs or bars than Aberdeen but still not quite at Inverness' 9.48%.

Inverness's streets have more clothes shops than the other three (8.5%), while Dundee is last with just 4.04% of them.

Shopping centres

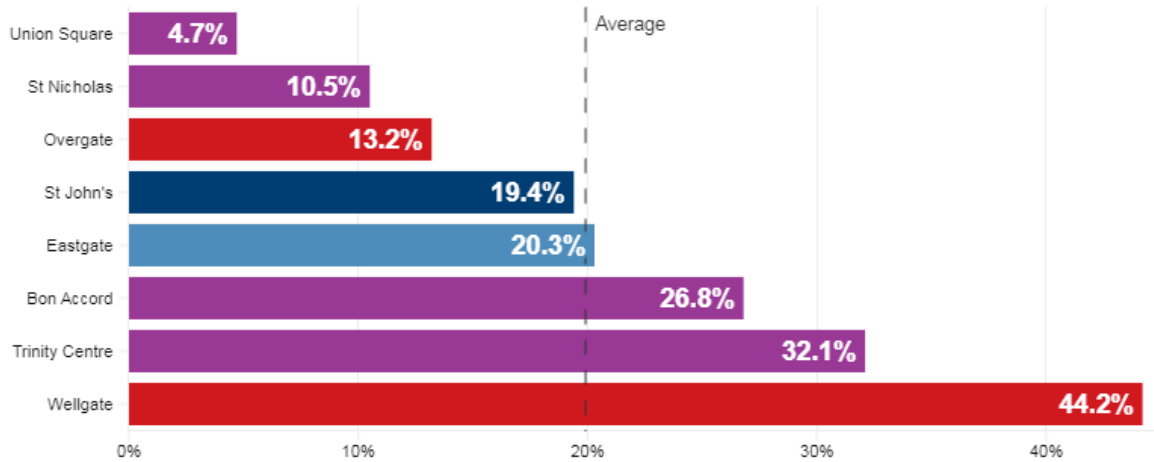
The shopping centres also reveal interesting distinctions between the cities.

Overall, we track 427 units across eight shopping centres located within the hearts of cities themselves.

On average across all of them, a fifth of units are empty. For comparison, the average across all high streets is 17.28%.

How do the shopping centre vacancy rates compare?

Shows vacancy rate for shopping centres in **Dundee**, **Perth**, **Aberdeen** and **Inverness**



Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on a April 15, 2024 snapshot

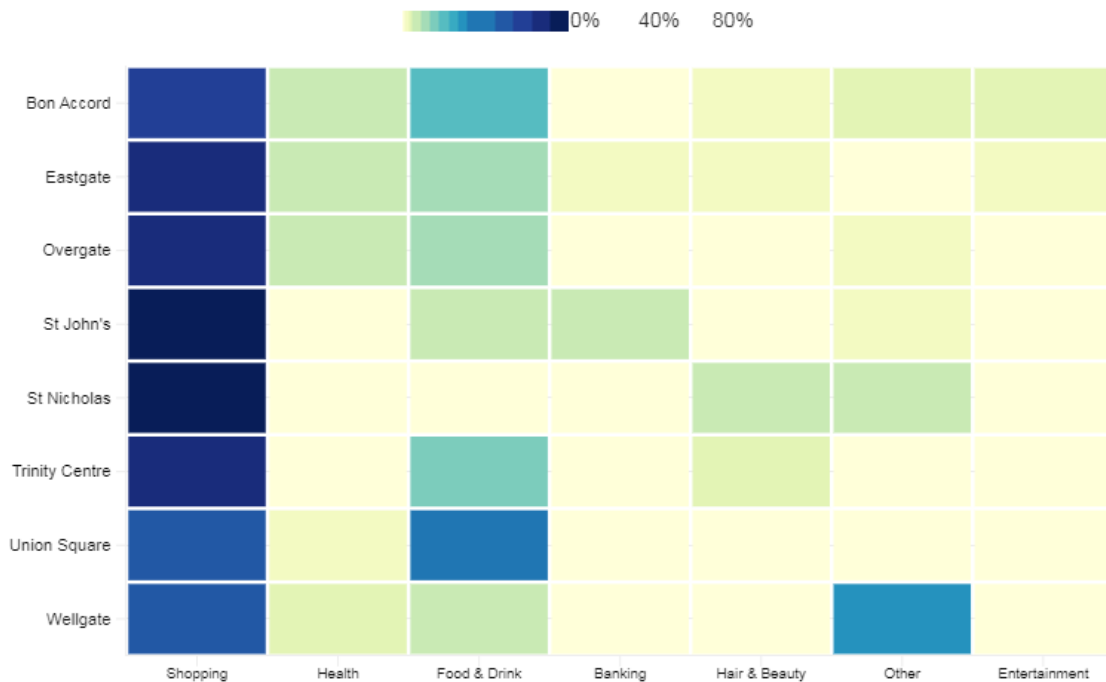
However, Dundee’s performance is clearly split between the relatively low vacancy rate of 13.2% in the Overgate to the bottom of the table with the Wellgate at 44.2%.

Both of the smaller cities remain very close to the average. Perth’s St John’s shopping centre has a vacancy rate just below (19.4%), while Inverness is just above it at 20.3%.

Union Square in Aberdeen has the lowest rate of empty units as well as having the highest number of units.

Shopping centres stick to the brief

Heatmap shows breakdown of each shopping centre by category



Source: DC Thomson high street trackers • Based on an April 15, 2024 snapshot

It is also the only one of the centres where more than a third of occupied units are food and drink related.

But Union Square is the only shopping centre that has a lower proportion of shops than the Wellgate which sits at 58.62%.

The Overgate has the fourth lowest proportion of shopping unit from the eight centres tracked.

Dundee may have had the least clothes shops on the high streets, but the Overgate is top for the category.

Clothes shops make up almost a quarter of the shopping centre (24.24%), while the Wellgate is second bottom at 6.9%.

Almost a third of the Wellgate is made up of third sector units— a category only appearing once in the Overgate and in none of the other tracked centres.

Union Square in Aberdeen, which has the lowest vacancy rate, has the highest proportion of restaurants and cafes with 34.15%. It is also second for clothes shops.

Restaurants and cafe make up just 10.61% and 3.45% of the Overgate and Wellgate respectively.

The Wellgate is the only one of the tracked shopping centres with a gym and an ice cream parlour. Meanwhile, the Overgate stands out as the only with the following subcategories: Alternative therapies, takeaway and vape shop.

Independent business analysis

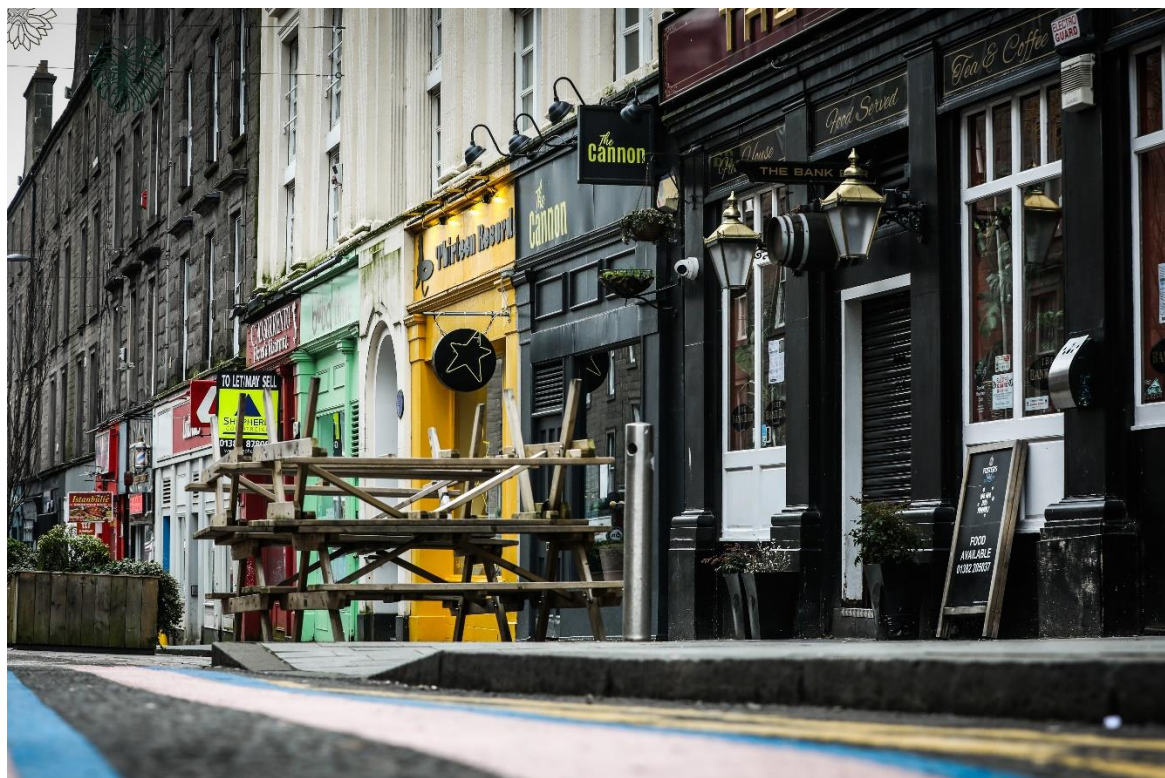
Independent retailers provide something different in a city - an experience that you can't get anywhere else.

They're an attractive pull for a place like Dundee to bring more people to the city- so using the data from our high street tracker in February 2024, we aimed to find out how many independent businesses exist in Dundee.

We also looked at the vacancy rates across all streets, and whether there was any correlation between the number of independent businesses in an area and the vacancy rates.

In our research, we found:

- More than three-quarters (76.84%) of businesses in the shopping centres are chains
- More than two-thirds (69.05%) of businesses on Dundee's high streets are independent
- Some of the streets with the lowest vacancy rates also have the highest percentages of independent businesses

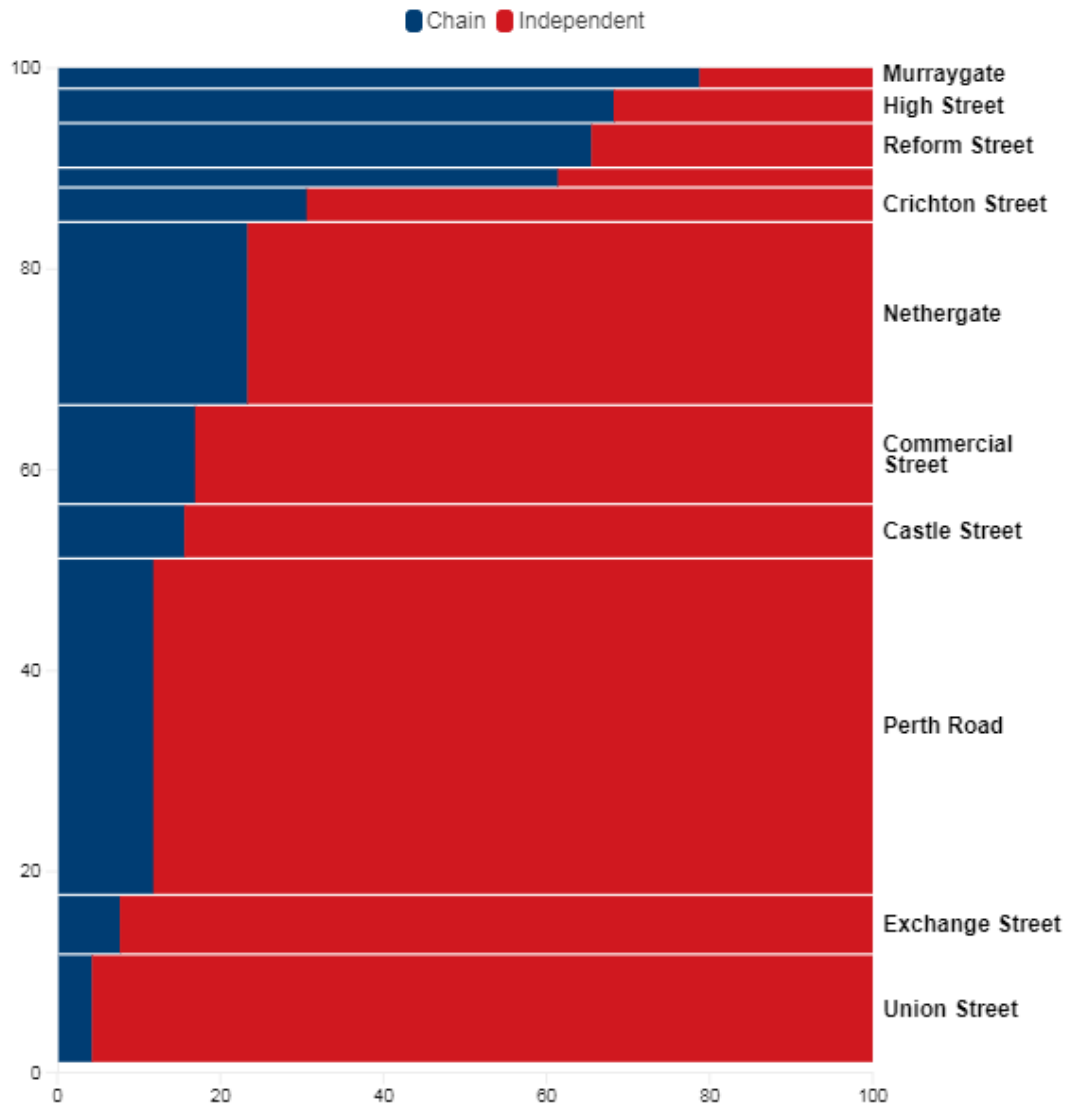


Across all our tracked streets, a total of 203 out of 294 businesses were categorised as independent – a total of 69.05%.

Eighty-seven of these were chains, while four were not categorised as they are public service buildings.

Union Street has the highest percentage of independent businesses

Chart shows the proportion of units in each high street that are independent and chains. Bar widths refer to the total number of units in the centre, the more units, the wider the bar is.



Source: Data gathered manually by The Courier • Data correct as of February 23 2024

Union Street and Exchange Street came out top for independent businesses, with both more than 90% independent.

Both streets only had one unit was occupied by a chain. On Union Street there is 23 units on the street, meaning 96% are independent.

On Exchange Street, there's 13 units and 92% are independent.

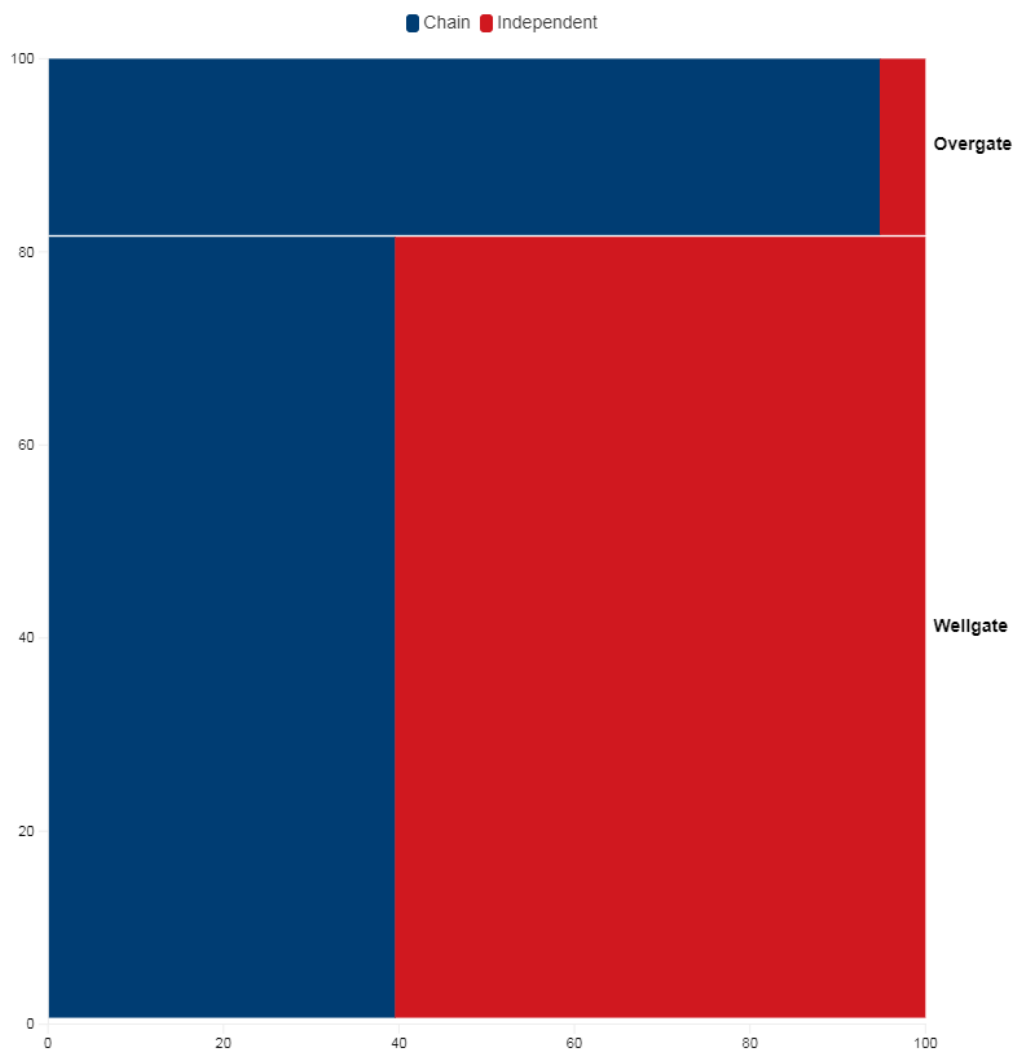
Perth Road, which has the most units out of all the streets we track on it at 77, has the third highest percentage of independent businesses- 68 out of 77(88%) are independently owned.

On the other side of the spectrum, Murraygate, High Street and Reform Street had the highest percentage of chains filling units.

Meanwhile, we also looked at the shopping centres.

The Overgate contains mostly businesses which are a chain

Chart shows the proportion of units in each shopping centre that are independent and chains. Bar widths refer to the total number of units in the centre, the more units, the wider the bar is.



Source: Data gathered manually by The Courier • Data correct as of February 23 2024

In total, 62 out of the 67 units in the Overgate Centre were chains – 92.54%.

The picture is different in the Wellgate Centre however. Of a total of 28 units occupied in the centre, 11 of these are chains, while 17 are independent.

However, it has a much higher overall vacancy rate than the Overgate does.

Do higher numbers of independent businesses lower vacancy rates?

Attracting businesses into Dundee is a priority for the city to ensure that units don't sit empty for long periods of time.

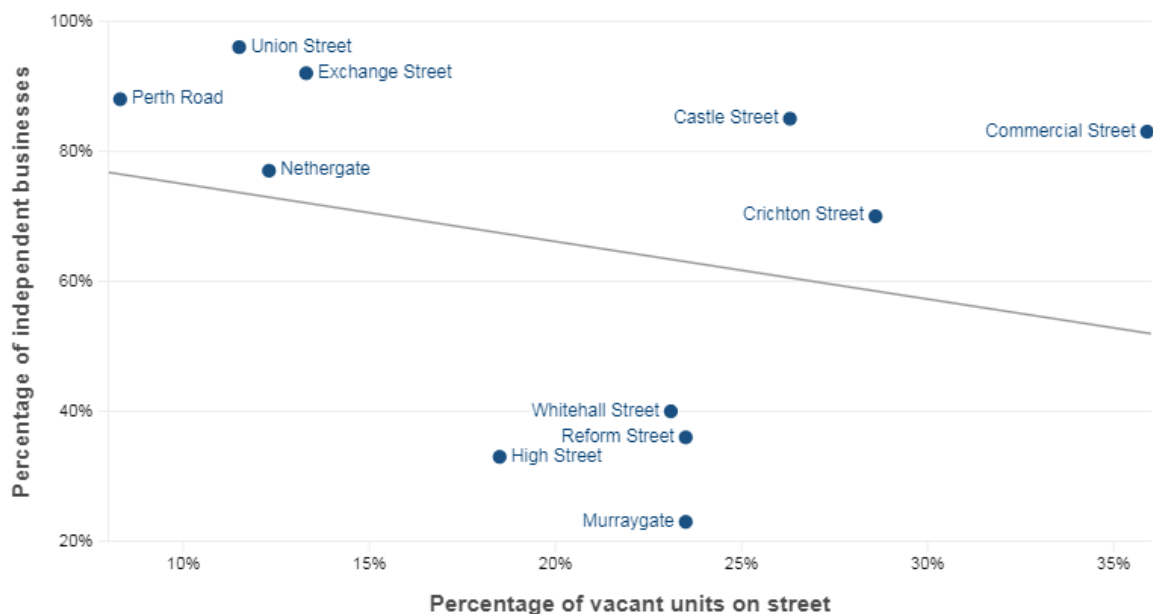
But does having an abundance of independent businesses on a street make it a more attractive place for opening a new store?

Our data shows that the street with the highest vacancy rate is Commercial Street, followed by Crichton Street and Castle Street.

Meanwhile Nethergate, Union Street and Perth Road have the lowest vacancy rates.

Does the number of independent businesses impact a street's vacancy rate?

Chart shows how each high street in Dundee we track compares in percentage of independent businesses vs percentage of units on the street that are vacant



Source: Data gathered manually by The Courier • High Street data includes City Square

The three streets with the highest vacancy rates also have a high number of independent units- the lowest being Crichton Street at 70% independent.

The three streets with the highest number of chains occupying units had average vacancy rates- the lowest being High Street, which is 18.5% empty and the highest 23.5% empty.

Meanwhile the three streets with the highest percentage of independent units also have some of the lowest vacancy rates.

So what does that mean?

As three of the businesses with the lowest overall vacancy rates have the highest percentages of independent businesses- it's clear that the presence of unique businesses may attract others to the area.

Despite Perth Road having the most businesses on it out of all the streets we track, it has the lowest vacancy rate and the third highest percentage of independent businesses.

Union Street and Exchange Street are both also clearly attractive areas for businesses, with high percentages of independents and low vacancy rates.

However, just because a road is mostly made up of chains, doesn't mean that it is more likely to be empty.

Murraygate, Reform Street and High Street might have the most chains, but they are not the streets with the highest vacancy rates.

Commercial Street has the highest number of vacant units despite being 83% independent – so while it might have a positive impact, it doesn't mean it is the only contributing factor.

It is difficult to say whether independent businesses impact vacancy rates within Dundee's shopping centres, as many of the businesses that fill the Wellgate are not businesses you might traditionally find in shopping centres, but instead are third sector charitable organisations.

On the other hand, Overgate shopping centre is mainly chains, but is only 10.5% vacant.

- More than half of respondents ranked Dundee as very or quite poor in terms of cleanliness, overall environment and variety of business
- However, more people ranked opening hours, accessibility and parking provision as very or quite good rather than poor

Profile of a Dundee shopper

We asked people how often they visited the city centre, when they visited and why they visited.

Most of those who visit do so on the weekend for shopping trips, with 174 participants out of 515 (33.78%) agreeing with this option.

The second-highest answer was for weekday shopping trips, which 150 out of 515 (29.12%) people agreed with.

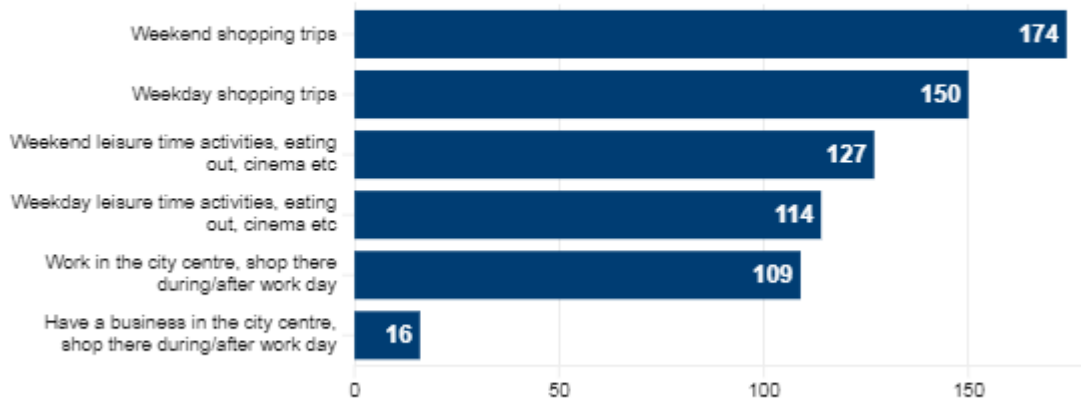
People were also invited to give their own reasons for travelling in, which were varied.

This included everything from going in to attend appointments including hairdressing, opticians, the dentist and to be vaccinated, to visiting family and social events such as meeting friends.

Others said they go in to make sure they are supporting local businesses.

Why do you visit Dundee City Centre?

Chart shows the number of people who said each option was their main reason for visiting Dundee City Centre



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated • 515 people in total answered this question within the survey

However, not everyone was so positive about why they go into the city centre.

Some people said they would visit the city centre to catch a bus or the train, to commute or drop off and pick up their children from school, while others said they

attended out of “desperation”, if they needed something quickly that they couldn’t get online first, for “necessities only”.

Ninety-nine people, or 19.37%, said they visited monthly, while 97, or 18.98% said they went in several times a week. Just slightly lower, 92 people said they visited weekly- which accounted for 18% of participants.

While some said that they rarely went into town, or only went in when necessary or for appointments, it’s clear that people still do visit the city centre regularly.

Meanwhile, our survey revealed that more than half of people (57.28%) who filled in our survey took their car in order to access the high street. A further 178 (35.03%) took the bus in, while 103 (20.27%) said they walked in.

Almost half of the participants who answered how far they travelled to get into Dundee city centre lived within four miles of the centre (47.82%).

Many people who visit live close by, with a further 113 people, or 22.3%, coming in from between five and nine miles away.

A further 59 people (11.66%) lived less than a mile from the centre.

What do people like when shopping in Dundee city centre?

To attract people into the high street, we need to make sure that the types of units on offer to entice them in.

But what types of businesses do people want to visit?

What types of business do you tend to visit?

Chart shows the number of people who said they visited each type of business, including business types included in the survey, and custom answers which were written in by participants



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated - 493 people in total answered this question within the survey

Restaurants/cafes/food and drink establishments come out top with what people surveyed go into the city centre for - 349 out of 493 people who answered the question said they visit these locations (71%).

The second-most popular choice was visiting clothes shops, which 292 people (59%) voted for.

The third most-chosen option was for supermarkets or food shops, where 174 people, or 35%, visited town for.

More than 100 people also visited for banks, charity shops and household goods shops.

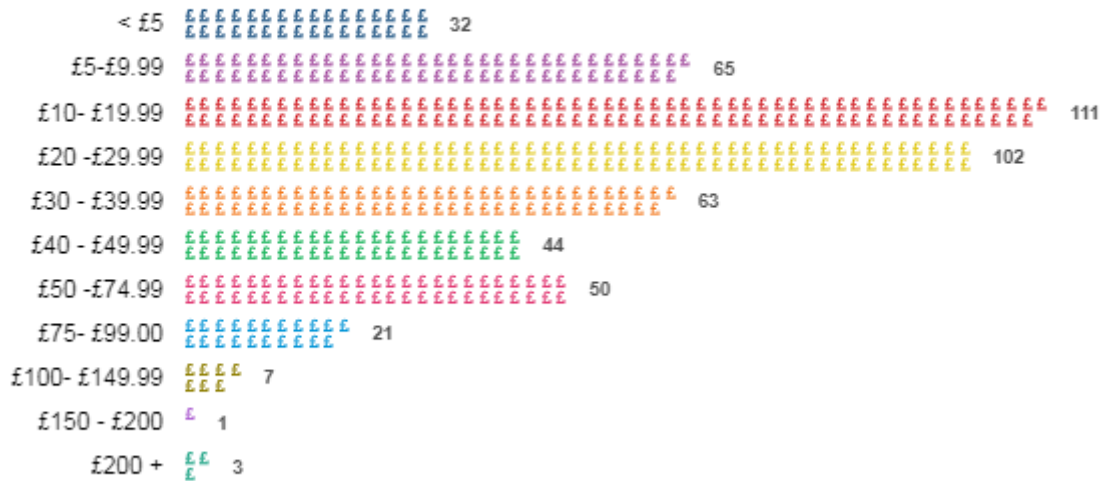
Less popular choices were gambling outlets, toy shops and music or record shops.

People were also invited to write in their own options for what entices them into the high street, with a variety of answers given. The most popular with people were book shops, DCA, [the gym](#), jewellery shops, coffee shops, outdoor stores and sport shops.

Other options included some more specific types of businesses, such as craft shops, travel agents, letting agents, off-licenses, vintage stores, libraries and museums.

How much do you spend on an average visit to Dundee City Centre?

Chart shows the number of people who agreed they spent each amount when surveyed



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated - 500 people in total answered this question within the survey

Our survey showed that when people are coming into the city centre, they tend to be spending smaller amounts of money - the majority of people said they spent between £5 and £40 on an average visit to the centre.

A total of 111 people out of 500 people who answered the question (22.2%) said they spent between £10 and £19.99, while 102 (20.4%) said they spent between £20 and £29.99 on an average visit.

The third-highest group said they spent between £5 and £9.99 and included 65 people out of 500 participants (13%).

What do they not like?

The survey encouraged people to describe the types of businesses that put them off visiting Dundee city centre.

Participants provided a variety of answers; however, some types of units were clearly more disliked than others.

Vape was mentioned 54 times among the survey responses, while vaping was mentioned a further 10 times.

Gambling was brought up 37 times, betting 20 times, bookies six times and bookmakers seven times.

This matches up with the responses given in the what types of businesses do you tend to visit question within our survey - as no-one who filled it out said that they visited gambling outlets.

What types of businesses put you off visiting Dundee City Centre?



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated • 225 comments were left for this question

Responses mentioned charity shops 38 times. When asked whether people tended to visit charity shops within the survey, 115 people out of 493 people (23.33%) said that they did go to charity shops when they visited the city centre.

The quality of shops was also a concern for several people - six people mentioned “cheap shops”, “cheap tacky shops” or “cheap tat shops” as something they didn’t want to see on their high street. Discount stores were also not a popular choice.

Anti-social behaviour was a problem for many people too. The number of fast-food outlets also appears to be proving an issue for some, with some respondents saying that it encourages littering and makes the surrounding streets look “shabby”.

Meanwhile, it is clear that Dundonians, and those who visit the city want something more unique from their city centre.

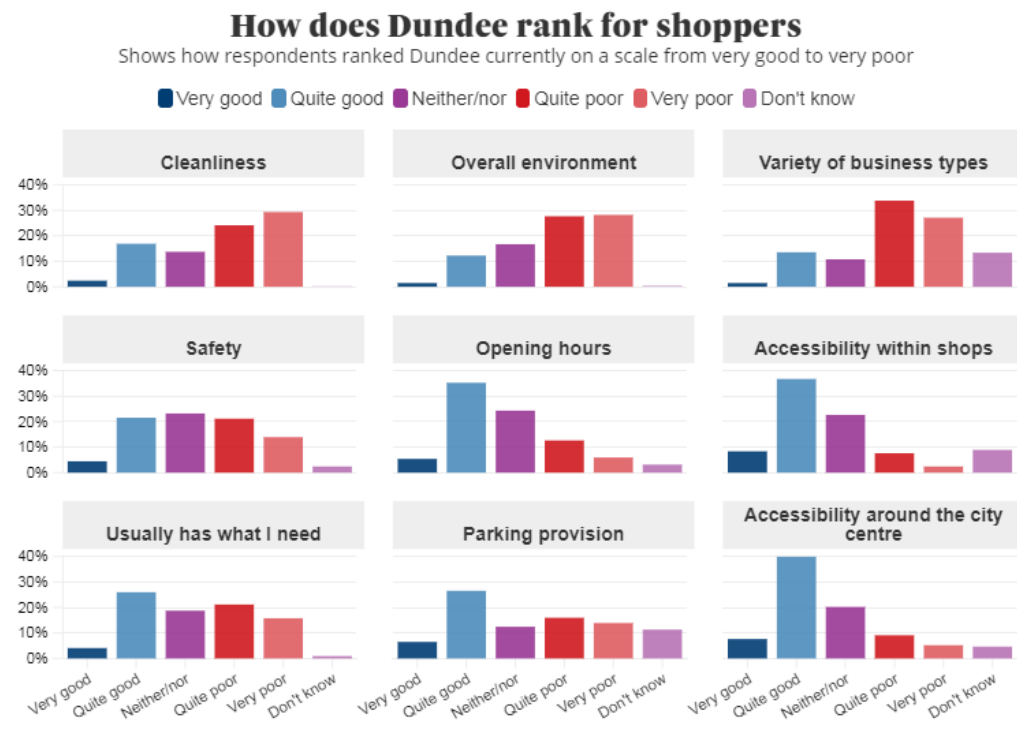
Many people mentioned supporting local businesses, and getting in fewer chain stores - especially when they are viewed as “undesirable”.

How does it rank?

Three out of five shoppers (60.9%) in the survey believed that Dundee was very or quite poor for its variety of business types.

One respondent said poor shop choices was driving young people towards online shopping.

“(It) has definitely deteriorated in my life (I’m only 18),” they wrote about Dundee city centre. “I think many people say us young people shop too much online but when shops like Zara, Size and Debenhams have closed down, it makes us go to Edinburgh/Glasgow/Livingston or shop online.”



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated + 539 answered this question

More than half also shared that negative perception of the overall environment (55.84%) and cleanliness (28.2%).

In fact, 29.3% thought cleanliness was very poor.

One person described the city as "filthy". They added: "Dundee used to be a vibrant, busy, clean place to visit.

"There was lots of choice for shops and it felt safe. Now none of these apply and it's a very sad state of affairs it has been allowed to deteriorate so far."

More than a third (35%) of respondents ranked safety as very or quite poor. Just over a quarter of people said it was quite or very good (25.9%).

Meanwhile, accessibility, opening hours and parking provision were, as a whole, more positively perceived.

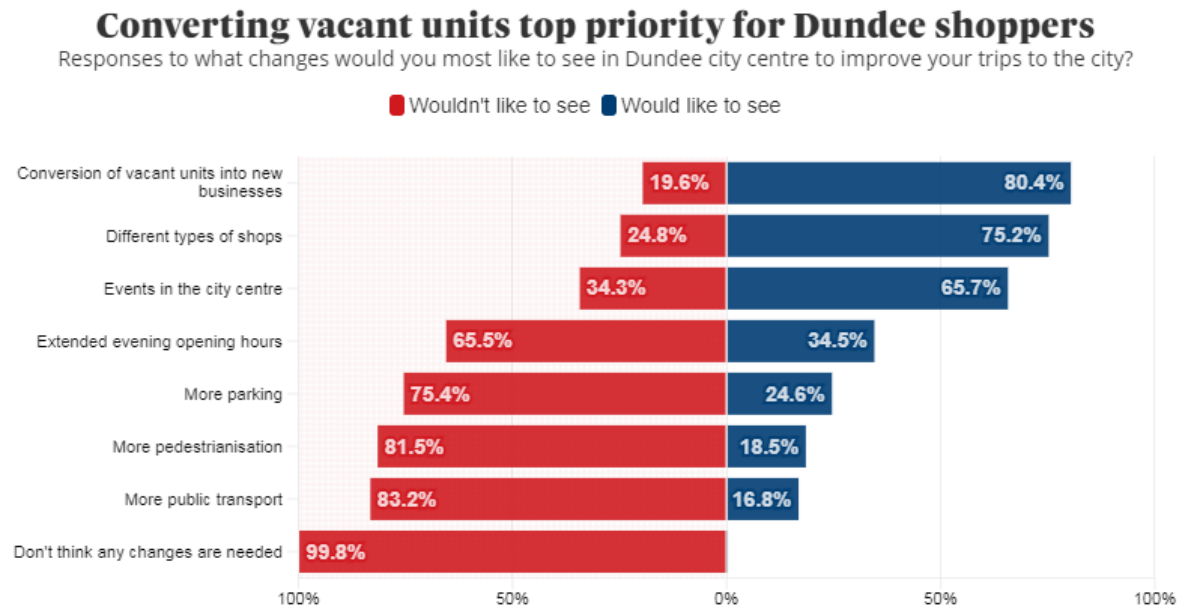
But what changes do the public want in Dundee?

What aspects of Dundee city centre shopping need to change?

Most of the surveyed shoppers crave a fresh profile of Dundee's high streets.

The top change that 80.4% respondents would like to see was converting vacant units into new businesses.

The other most-wanted changes were different types of shops (75.2%) and events in the city centre (65.7%).



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated • 464 answered this question

We had 287 separate custom responses about changes that they would like to see in the city centre.

The most popular change in these responses revolved around was reducing anti-social behaviour and drug use.

Changes to shop selections or specific suggestions followed, including mentions of House of Frasers that is expected to take over the former Debenhams site.

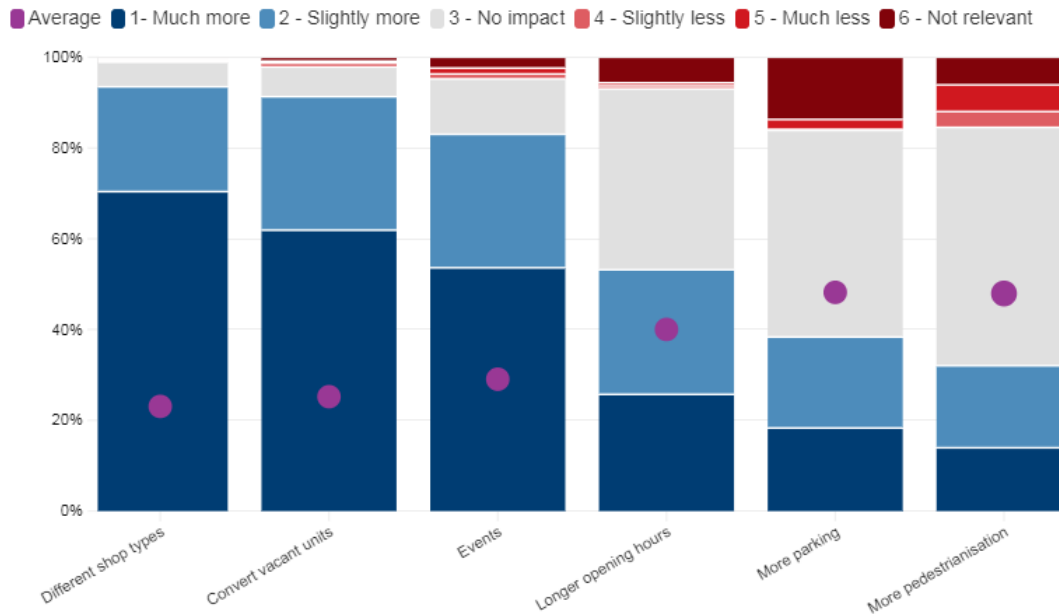
There were also requests for a reduction in specific types of units such as charity shops.

We also asked shoppers what would actually prompt them to visit the high street more.

More than nine in ten (93.5%) said different shop types would make them much or slightly more likely to visit.

Does Dundee need a shop shake up?

If the following changes were made to the city centre, how, if at all, would they affect your likelihood to consider visiting in the future?



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated • 459 answered this question
Average is arithmetic mean of responses

The conversion of vacant units into new businesses was just behind with 91%.



Less than a third of respondents (32%) said more pedestrianisation would make them much or slightly more likely to visit. Over half said it would have no impact.

More parking would make 38.3% of respondents more likely to visit the city centre. It would have no impact for 45.5%.

However, the price of the parking featured frequently in the custom responses. It was the fourth-most commonly mentioned topic (28 responses).

Events in the city centre could also help bring more feet to the high streets. A total of 83% said they would make them much or slightly more likely to visit.

Business rates weigh heavily on retailers

The survey also asked retailers how hopeful they are about the future of their sector in Dundee.

More two thirds (67.6%) of the 37 responses said they were either not hopeful or had an overall negative perception of the state of the retail sector.

Meanwhile, only around a fifth (21.6%) said they were hopeful.

Business rates, mentioned in over a quarter of the responses (27%), were the most common concern.

What initiatives could help businesses in Dundee according to retailers

Size of circle indicates number of mentions in retailer specific-responses



Source: The Courier Dundee Matters survey - 539 people participated • There were 33 custom retailer responses

“The major issue facing businesses is that of business rates,” one person wrote.

“For as long as there is no relationship between the reality of doing business in Dundee and the rates required to be paid to do that business, there will continue to be empty shops.”

It was followed by two topics that were also frequently raised by shoppers: anti-social behaviour and poor unit choices.

Unsurprisingly, retailers overwhelmingly listed reducing rates as an initiative that could help.

The idea of cutting rates appeared in more than half of the 33 responses.

Five survey responses listed reducing or even providing some free parking in Dundee.

"I am not hopeful at all," one retailer wrote.

"The rents and rates are too expensive to attract new business. The issue with the drug users frequenting the whole of the city centre is a disgrace. You don't see it in any other city centre.

"Shoplifting is rife throughout, shop staff are limited as companies keep cutting back due to decreasing footfall.

"It is now better to go to Edinburgh or Glasgow for a day's shopping than stay in Dundee.

"There needs to be a plan drawn up between all the relevant agencies, council, police, retailers, charities to tackle all the issues."

Methodology

We launched the high street survey on February 23 when we [launched our Dundee Matters initiative](#).

It ran for a total of 39 days until April, receiving 539 responses from people who visit the city centre.

However, we also wanted to ensure we got out on the streets and spoke to shoppers in person.

Of the total responses, we collected 35 in person from shoppers visiting [the Overgate](#) on March 31.

Key lessons from our High Street Summit

Our High Street Summit brought together experts and stakeholders invested in creating a better city centre.

An architect of a programme which changed the fortunes of one of England’s most notorious “ghost towns” has told Dundee to be “brave” in its approach to improving its city centre.

Matt Colledge created and led Altrincham Forward, a public, private and community partnership that spearheaded the transformation of the English market town.

He was a guest speaker at The Courier’s Dundee Matters event at Meadowside, which saw community and business leaders come together to discuss how to reverse the decline of the city centre.

Mr Colledge warned of a “toxic nostalgia” which can plague regeneration projects and said an integrated approach utilising Dundee’s many assets would help revitalise the city centre experience.



A panel including council administration leader John Alexander, Chamber of Commerce president Kelly-Anne Fairweather, urban planning expert Dr Husam Alwaer, entrepreneur Ron Smith and Mr Colledge, discussed problems surrounding the High Street.

The panellists also fielded questions from the audience, assembled from invited business owners and stakeholders with The Courier editor David Clegg compering the discussion.

Attendees quizzed them on a range of topics including the controversial LEZ, parking charges, cleanliness and empty shopping units.

Changed the face of Altrincham

Mr Colledge explained Altrincham had, in 2010, the highest High Street vacancy rate in England.

After years of investment and engagement with public and private sector bodies, the town was able to reduce its empty-shop rate by 73%.



Its historic market, which in 2010 had a turnover of around £150,000 annually, now rakes in more than £7 million a year. This, from a public-sector investment of around £1m, he said.

Decision makers and the public at large, he added, had to be prepared to cut ties from the past which could stifle change.

“One of the things we found with the Altrincham task force was this phrase we coined, toxic nostalgia,” he said.

“People looking back to a period of time that probably wasn’t as wonderful as it seemed.

“What we probably have to do is capture the best of what we had, and if we can repackage it for the future, then brilliant.

“But we need to change, we need to move and we need to move on.

“That really reflected the vision that we had (for Altrincham).

“The council did spend money, on repurposing the realm, to make it a better and more welcoming environment.”

Footfall is key

Restaurant owner and president of Dundee and Angus Chamber of Commerce president Kelly-Anne Fairweather highlighted the changing face of shopping and consumer habits.

She said business owners in the city centre were willing to work on a more collaborative approach and appreciated that High Street shopping and retail were not what they once were.



She said: “The city is changing. Like any city centre, one of the pressures is footfall.

“When there are events on in the city, we all benefit. Whether that’s the farmers market, the markets that run at the Steeple, events in the Keiller Centre...we need to stop looking at things as competition and have more collaboration.

“If there are people in the city centre, and the door (of your business is open) then chances are you will benefit from that.

“I think we are sometimes not as good as we should be in getting a calendar of events together.

“But most people want to push things forward. They want to work in a more collaborative fashion.

“We have to accept that High Street shopping is not what it once was.

“So, what else can we do to bring people in?”

Addressing negative image of Dundee city centre

Dr Husam Alwaer is the programme director for Dundee University’s urban planning department.

He is an award-winning author and curator of events, focussing on issues of place making and urban design practice and their social impacts.



Dr Alwaer explained the importance of the city’s High Street as the “spine” of Dundee.

He noted the relationship between the city centre, the waterfront and the rest of the city was paramount in helping revive it.

He said: “The High Street of Dundee is the spine of the community.

“Before retail, it was the core of the city centre. It served Dundee and its people beyond retail.

“In terms of the public authority, libraries, public health and so on. We really need to look at that ‘spine’ once again.

“And it is not in a vacuum. In terms of connectivity, that ‘spine’ needs to speak with the rest of the city, with its relationship with the waterfront, its relationship with the rest of the city.

“Basically, let us reinvent convenience into our High Street. What is really important too is the experience, not just the provision of stuff.”

Change to non domestic rates needed

Ron Smith is the managing director of Glamis Investments, a private crowdfunding business which funds innovative UK businesses.

He raised the issue of differences in business rates which he claimed favoured out of town retail parks.



He also suggested online sellers should be targeted with a 5% transaction charge which could be given back to councils to invest.

“Scotland’s GDP is dominated by inward investment,” he said.

“Tesco, Asda, Curries, Boots...and these companies offer only one thing to Dundonians, and all cities and towns in Scotland.

“That is subsistence earnings.

“All the prosperity which was here 25-35 years ago, that was based on local businesses, has been sucked out of Scotland and generally goes to London, is taxed there, and then distributed to non-Scottish shareholders.

“Whereas, in the past, that prosperity that was raised in Dundee, was spent in Dundee.

“One of the things that upsets me is the inertia of government to recognise these things.

“If you are a retailer out at the Kingsway retail park, and you can only get there because you are a big business...your non-domestic rates are subsidised.

“You pay about 30% per square foot of what someone is charged in the town.

“That is one of the reasons we have vacant shops.

“We have to have a rebalancing. We need to charge the out-of-town businesses more...and use that money to support city centres.”

As well as making a pledge to invest more on the cleanliness of the city centre, Dundee City Council leader John Alexander said he would “continue to challenge” the Scottish Government for changes to non-domestic rates.

Outcomes

An additional £200,000 is to be spent cleaning up the city centre, following revelations brought about by The Courier’s Dundee Matters campaign.

The extra money will go toward hiring more environmental services staff as well as bringing in private contractors to deep clean the city centre.

Council administration leader John Alexander committed to the funding at The Courier’s High Street Summit at Meadowside.

It follows information gleaned from an exclusive survey carried out by The Courier which found more than half of respondents felt the cleanliness of the city’s High Street was “poor” or “very poor”.

Mr Alexander also pledged the council would look at reducing “some parking charges” as well as looking at improving vacant shopfronts.

It was part of a range of measures the council will undertake to improve the High Street.



Working with youth-groups including Hot Chocolate Trust and Street Soccer Scotland, a programme has been launched to tackle youth crime.

And a review of how the DD1 group works and “beefing up” support encouraging more private sector businesses to join is to take place.

Mr Alexander said: “Everyone is acutely aware, cleanliness in general has taken a dip.

“This is partly driven by the fact we have seen such a significant decrease in public sector finance.

“Recognition of that, and doing something about it is what everyone wants to see.

“So an additional £200,000 will be spent on the environment over the coming months.

“That will mean additional staff.

“We are bringing in external contractors and ‘street scrubbers’ (to clean the ‘stickiness’ from the pavement).

“But also work in replacing the planters, removing graffiti, dressing shops which are looking tired.

“So there will be £200,000 directed toward the environment, for more staff and more equipment.

“Over and above that, there is a network of actions being taken forward.

“And hopefully (people) will see that over the coming weeks and months, which fingers crossed, will have a noticeable improvement on issues seen through (The Courier’s) survey.”

Dundee is also set to benefit from a multi-million regeneration programme as part of the UK Government’s “levelling up” scheme.

The £20 million investment, announced in May, is meant to “attract investment and increase opportunities for local people”.

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Questions?

Lesley-Anne Kelly
Head of Data Journalism
lkelly@dcthomson.co.uk