

Economy & Regeneration Scrutiny Review - District Centres Post Covid-19 Pandemic February to April 2022



Foreword by Cllr Colin MacAlister, Chair of the Scrutiny Review Panel

“It was a pleasure to lead this Review and I want to thank my fellow panel members for their input and support.

The timing for carrying out this review was particularly relevant given the important role District Centres have played in supporting their local communities during the last 2 years. It’s good to see more people shopping locally and using local businesses.

It was good to meet the 2 new District Centre Managers and even though they only started their new roles a few months ago it was good to hear how they are already supporting local retailers and helping to deliver events and activities. We also received some initial feedback on the Institute of Place Management workshops and it was encouraging that they were so well attended with lots of positive discussions and stakeholders keen to work together. It was also good to visit some of our centres and hear directly from stakeholders.

The Panel was pleased that the IPM work is progressing and is looking forward to seeing the Action Plans that are being produced. Panel members also discovered that all our District Centres have vacancy rates significant lower than the national average and also have a higher proportion of independent retailers which is positive as they help attract visitors.

Whilst significant progress has been made to ensure District Centres are a priority the Panel has a number of recommendations which it feels would help ensure District Centres continue to thrive. I would like to recommend to Cabinet they note the key findings and recommendations included in this report.”

Councillor Colin MacAlister, Chair of the Scrutiny Review Panel

1.0 Introduction – The Local Context and Background to the review

- 1.1 The Council's commitment to the sustainability and vitality of its District Centres is of fundamental importance to the Borough as a whole and to the Council's ability to address the needs and aspirations of local residents. The Borough's District Centres do, however, face a number of opportunities and challenges which require a new kind of response from the Council. The Council's overall approach to help create strong, vibrant District Centres was shaped by a joint Communities & Housing and Economy & Regeneration Scrutiny Review into District Centres back in 2018/19.
- 1.2 As each of our District Centres has its own unique characteristics as well as its own strengths and challenges the 2018/19 Scrutiny Review identified the need to deliver bespoke place-based interventions that can ensure each District Centre can fully serve its local residents. To assist with this the Council began working in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University's Institute for Place Management (IPM) who are internationally recognised leaders in the field of coordinated, multi-stakeholder approaches to improving places. The first phase of this work involved a high-level assessment of each district centre based on the 25 key factors within IPM's High Street 2020 report – see Appendix 1 for full list of factors.
- 1.3 The high-level assessment identified strengths and weaknesses in each of the district centres and proposed a range of activities that have the ability to make a positive impact on each centre.
- 1.4 Building on the Phase 1 work Phase 2 work commenced in early 2020 and involved the installation of footfall counters in the 8 district centres, however, due to the pandemic the remaining elements of Phase 2 were put on hold.

Dedicated District Centre Staff Support Capacity

- 1.5 Following the Phase 1 work with IPM it became apparent delivering tangible improvements in complex multi-stakeholder environments would require dedicated capacity within the Council to coordinate and facilitate the work, provide leadership and accountability, and act as the main point of contact for stakeholders within each centre.
- 1.6 Funding was secured from within existing budgets to support two new District Centre Manager posts. Richard Daniels and Darren Flannery who took up their new roles in early January 2022, sit in the Development & Regeneration Team and along with liaising with local businesses and organisations, work in partnership with colleagues from across the Council including the Neighbourhoods Team, Highways, Planning and the Economy, Work & Skills Team. These roles are particularly important in light of a changing context for

retail and public service provision following the challenges of the previous two years.

Institute of Place Management - Phase 2

- 1.7 Following the easing of restrictions Phase 2 activities recommenced in February 2022. This was considered an opportune time given district centres play a major role in the delivery of a number of the Council's key priorities including the emerging Local Plan, current and future transport investment, school's capacity, and health and social care integration.
- 1.8 As part of Phase 2 IPM delivered workshops in each of the 8 district centre throughout March 2022 which brought together local stakeholders to ensure a wide range of input into recommendations produced. A variety of stakeholders who play an important part in ensuring District Centres are vibrant attended the workshops including retailers, key employers, leisure providers, landowners, community groups, and residents.
- 1.9 Following the workshops individual action plans for each of the 8 district centres are being produced by IPM. These plans will include quick wins along with longer term actions to work towards to help improve the Centres' vitality and viability. Dashboards to measure the impact of interventions, over short, medium and longer-term will form part of the Action Plans.

The new Stockport Economic Plan

- 1.10 As a supporting delivery plan to the One Stockport Borough Plan, the Stockport Economic Plan will play a vital role in setting out how the priorities of the Borough Plan will be achieved and will also inform the development of the Local Plan by identifying the key economic priorities for the borough. The Plan will also be an integral part of the Borough's collective response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic challenges that has and continues to present. By its nature, the Plan will be a live document and will be reviewed regularly to respond to the changing economic landscape.
- 1.11 There is a clear link to the importance of the Economic Plan for the District Centres and the relevance of the Centres in contributing to delivering the actions identified in the Plan.

2.0 Scope of the Review

- 2.1 As the pandemic has shown, our district centres are incredibly important centres and lifelines for our communities. Local residents have shown a strong desire not only to support one another but to support local retailers, hospitality and leisure businesses all of which assist in creating strong viable centres.
- 2.2 It was therefore agreed the Scrutiny Review of District Centres Post Covid-19 Pandemic focused on:
- i. Reviewing the scope of Phase 2 to be delivered in partnership with IPM
 - ii. Seeking views from Members on the roles and responsibilities of the 2 new District Centre Managers – emerging priority work areas
 - iii. Relevance of the emerging Stockport Economic Plan in creating vibrant and thriving District Centres.
 - iv. Business closures – those that have closed or moved online due be contacted so that the council can gain an understanding of the pressures faced by businesses, and to inform the council's work in supporting the business community going forward.

3.0 Methodology

- 3.1 The Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee appointed a Panel to carry out the Review comprising of the following members:-

Councillor Colin MacAlister - Panel Chair
Councillor Grace Baynham
Councillor Roy Driver
Councillor Steve Gribbon
Councillor Mike Hurleston
Councillor Oliver Johnstone

- 3.2 As part of the Review, the Panel had the support and assistance of:-

- Paul Richards, Director of Development & Regeneration
- Helen Walters, Town Centre Manager
- Richard Mortimer, Head of Economy, Work & Skills
- Charlotte Griffin – CSS Manager (Democratic Services)

- 3.3 The Panel met on 4 occasions between February and April 2022 and followed the timetable set out below:-

Meeting One (14th February 2022) – Scope the Review

Meeting Two (14th March 2022) – Focus on evidence gathering

Meeting Three (1st April 2022) – Site visits to 3 District Centres :- Cheadle, Edgeley and Romiley

Meeting Four (14th April 2022) – Final meeting to discuss feedback from site visits and agree recommendations for final report.

4.0 Classification of uses in District Centres pre and post Covid-19 pandemic

- 4.1 The Council subscribes to the Local Data Company, an independent retail location insight company who track retail and leisure business across the entire country. In addition, LDC tracks all trade and national press for openings and closures, and updates retail chains via their head offices and websites. They collect vacancy data and for those units that are occupied they record the use under the 4 main classifications of Comparison, Convenience, Service or Leisure. Detailed business type breakdowns are also available such as restaurant, hairdresser, bookmaker and supermarket.
- 4.2 The LDC vacant and classifications data for each of the 8 District Centres is included in Appendix 1 and in addition to including data for each District Centre it compares it to the national average to help ascertain whether the Centre has an over or under supply of certain business types. The Panel reviewed the data and the following observations were noted.

Vacancy Rates

- All 8 District Centres have vacant rates significantly less than national average (14.2%) for the High Street which is very encouraging.
- 3 Centres have lower vacancy rates than 3 years ago – Bramhall, Cheadle Hulme & Marple.
- Edgeley, Cheadle, Reddish & Romiley have seen a slight increase compared to 3 years ago.

Use Classification

- Cheadle has a diversity mix that is closest to the National average, followed by Romiley.
- Cheadle Hulme & Hazel Grove have a diversity mix that is least like the National average, followed by Edgeley.
- Bramhall, Edgeley & Romiley have all experienced an increase in comparison uses over last 3 years

- Bramhall & Reddish have seen a fairly noticeable decline in services over the last 3 years, 5 % and 4% respectively, Edgeley seen a relative high increase of 5% and others no real change.
- Over last 3 years all centres apart from Edgeley have seen an increase in the proportion of leisure uses.

Independents v Multiples

- All 8 District Centres have a higher proportion of independents than the national average – this is positive as independent shops give residents a variety reasons to visit different district centres.
- At 89% Romiley has the highest proportion of independents
- At 69.3% Cheadle has the lowest proportion of independents

- 4.3 The site visits to Edgeley, Cheadle and Romiley helped to reiterate what the Local Data Company data was illustrating as it was very evident that there were very few vacant units and the dominance of independent retailers, many of whom have evolved their businesses following the challenges of the previous 2 years. This was particularly evident in Cheadle where the Panel met the co-owners of Create It! They have diversified providing paint at home kits and the introduction of a booking system to ensure Covid compliant distancing has proved beneficial and has become a permanent arrangement.
- 4.4 During the site visits the Panel met businesses and organisations who attended the IPM workshops. They were positive about the way they were delivered, the information shared and the discussions that took place between the variety of different stakeholders many of whom were enthusiastic with a strong willingness to collaborate to create a thriving District Centre.

5.0 Business Closures

- 5.1 Whilst Local Data Company do record churn within each District Centre for a range of reasons it is very difficult to obtain reliable information on why businesses close. It is often anecdotal evidence which whilst of some use, should be treated with caution as some business owners might not be honest in why they have ceased trading or are relocating. In particular contact details can be difficult to obtain once a businesses has ceased trading and there is often a reluctance to share information.
- 5.2 The Panel noted that by having 2 District Centre Managers proactively meeting and liaising with businesses and organisations on a regular basis in the Centres it is hoped that strong, collaborative relationships will be created. This will allow the Managers to support business owners and help identify concerns early on so they can be connected to the range of business support that is available to them. Inevitably businesses will come and go but moving

forward the Managers should have more robust information on the reasons for closing.

6.0 Stockport Economic Plan and how it contributes to Sustainable District Centres

6.1 The Economic Plan forms a vital part of the Borough's response to the economic impacts of the pandemic and has been developed in partnership with stakeholders to articulate a shared set of priorities and actions to address both the economic challenges but also the economic opportunities identified for Stockport and, consequently, the District Centres.

6.2 The draft Stockport Economic Plan, the result of an intensive period of engagement, co-design and co-production with key stakeholders from across the borough, was shared with the Panel. The Plan is based on four key pillars that have several actions sitting within each pillar:

➤ ***Fair & Inclusive***

Supporting a fairer economy where local people are the primary beneficiaries of regeneration and growth

➤ ***Enterprising & Productive***

Capturing a bigger share of high value knowledge jobs, while supporting a resilient foundational economy

➤ ***Climate Friendly & Resilient***

Tackling the climate emergency, growing the green economy and enabling Stockport to build back better and recover from the impacts of Covid

➤ ***Accessible & Connected***

Ensuring sustainable transport infrastructure and digital infrastructure supports employment and inclusive economic growth, and ensuring reliable public transport improves access to opportunities across the Borough.

6.3 The Panel considered a range of District Centre focused actions which they felt would address both the economic challenges and the economic opportunities of District Centres. The priority actions were as follows:

- i. Develop shared workspace in the District Centres so that new start up and grow on phase businesses can access a desk and office type space without the need to travel into the town centre to access these facilities. This would also bring additional spend to local businesses in the area for refreshments etc.

- ii. Retail is an important part of the business mix in district centres and some find it challenging to recruit staff. Through Stockport Jobs Match develop specific pages on the online platform that could showcase local retailers and promote the job vacancies they are looking to recruit to (free of charge to the businesses).

7.0 Key Findings & Recommendations

- 7.1 The Panel noted that Stockport's District Centre all have an important and broad ranging role at the heart of the local communities they serve. In addition to being retail centres they support the local economy, provide a wide range of services and leisure opportunities, serve as a focal point for social interaction, and essentially act as hubs for the local community.
- 7.2 The Panel made the following observations and recommendations in relation to supporting District Centres as they recover from the challenges of the last 2 years:
 - i. The Panel welcomed the workshops being delivered by IPM as part of their Phase 2 work and were pleased that a range of stakeholders were engaging in the process. They looked forward to receiving copies of the Action Plans when available in June 2022.
 - ii. The Panel were pleased that 2 District Centre Managers had been appointed. They were supportive of their role which involves supporting local retailers in accessing business support, assisting local organisations and co-ordinating, supporting and/or delivering events and local initiatives which stimulate the local economy and support local communities. They Panel emphasised the importance of the Managers working closely with Council colleagues and with partner organisations.
 - iii. The Panel noted the importance of continuing to work collaboratively with partners to address any issues associated with Anti-Social Behaviour when they first arise.
 - iv. The Panel asked for Officers to consider how to improve communication with businesses so they were more familiar with the support and funding available to them along with other information specific to their centre that would be of benefit to them and their customers.
 - v. The Panel requested the delivery of dedicated business support workshops for District Centre businesses to help them promote their business to local residents as part of the Shop Local initiative. These workshops to cover social media training along with other digital skills.

- vi. The Panel requested opportunities to be explored to help improve the attractiveness of district centres such as installing planters which also have many environmental benefits.
- vii. The Panel requested the District Centre Managers work in partnership with businesses and local organisations to ensure the centres remain clean and tidy for shoppers and visitors.
- viii. The Panel requested other opportunities be explored to help promote the breadth of businesses within District Centre such as posters and maps.
- ix. The Panel asked if there was any funding from existing budgets that could be allocated for District Centres. The funding could support the delivery of small scale projects in each centre. This will require further investigation.

Appendices

Appendix 1: IPM High Street Report – 25 Key Factors

Appendix 2: Local Data Company vacant and classifications data for each of the eight District Centres

APPENDIX 1

IPM High Street Report – 25 Key Factors

1. ACTIVITY HOURS	Ensuring the centre is open when the catchment needs it. What are the shopping hours? Is there an evening economy? Do the activity hours of the centre match the needs of the catchment?
2. APPEARANCE	Improving the quality of the visual appearance. How clean is the centre?
3. RETAILERS	Offering the right type and quantity of retailers. What retailers are represented?
4. VISION & STRATEGY	Having a common vision and some leadership. Do stakeholders collaborate? Is the vision incorporated in local plans?
5. EXPERIENCE	Considering the quality of the experience? Measuring levels of service quality and visitor satisfaction. What is the image of the centre?
6. MANAGEMENT	Building capacity to get things done. Is there effective management – of the shopping centre(s) and town centre?
7. MERCHANDISE	Meeting the needs of the catchment. What is the range and quality of goods on offer?
8. NECESSITIES	Ensuring basic facilities are present and maintained. Is there appropriate car-parking; amenities; general facilities, like places to sit down and toilets etc.?
9. ANCHORS	The presence of an anchor which drives footfall. This could be retail (like a department store) or could be a busy transport interchange or large employer.
10. NETWORKS & PARTNERSHIPS	Presence of strong networks and effective formal or informal partnerships. Do stakeholders communicate and trust each other? Can the Council facilitate action (not just lead it?)
11. DIVERSITY	A multi-functional centre. What attractions are there, apart from retail? What is the tenant mix and tenant variety?
12. WALKABILITY	The ‘walkability’ of the centre. Are linked trips between areas possible – or are the distances too great? Are there other obstacles that stop people walking?
13. ENTERTAINMENT & LEISURE	An entertainment and leisure offer. What is it? Is it attractive to various segments of the catchment?
14. ATTRACTIVENESS	The ‘pulling power’ of a centre. Can it attract people from a distance?

15. PLACE ASSURANCE	Getting the basics right. Does the centre offer a basic level of customer service, is this consistent? Or do some operators, or parts of the offer, let this down?
16. ACCESSIBLE	Each of reach. How convenient is the centre to access? Is it accessible by a number of different means, e.g. car, public transport, cycling etc.?
17. PLACE MARKETING	Communicating the offer. How does the centre market and promote itself? Do all stakeholders communicate a consistent image? How well does the centre orientate visitors and encourage flow – with signage and guides etc.
18. COMPARISON/CONVENIENCE	The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience. Is this sustainable?
19. RECREATIONAL SPACE	The amount and quality of recreational areas and public space/open space. Are there places that are uncommodified? Where people can enjoy spending time without spending money?
20. BARRIERS TO ENTRY	Refers to obstacles that make it difficult for interested retailers to enter the centre's market. What is the location doing to make it easier for new businesses to enter?
21. CHAIN VS INDEPENDENT	Number of multiples stores and independent stores in the retail mix of a centre/High Street. Is this suitably balanced?
22. SAFETY/CRIME	A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting. Perceptions of crime are usually higher than actual crime rates. Does the centre monitor these and how does it communicate results to stakeholders?
23. LIVEABILITY	The resident population or potential for residential in the centre. Does the centre offer the services/environment that residents need? Doctors, schools etc.
24. ADAPTABILITY	The flexibility of the space/property in a centre. Are there inflexible and outdated units that are unlikely to be re-let or re-purposed?
25. STORE DEVELOPMENT	The willingness for retailers/property owners to develop their stores. Are they willing to coordinate/cooperate in updating activities? Or do they act independently?



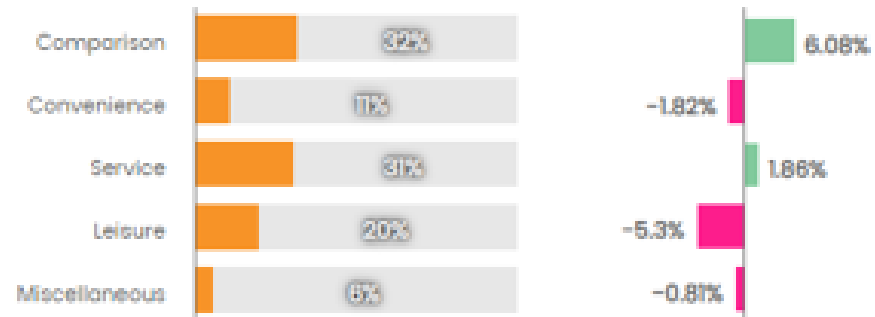
STOCKPORT
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

District Centre Classification

source:
Local Data Company

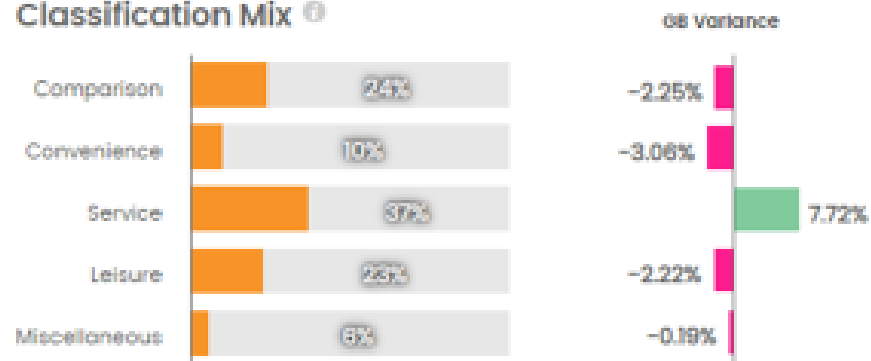


Classification Mix ⁱ

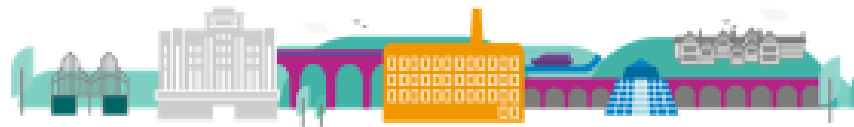


Bramhall

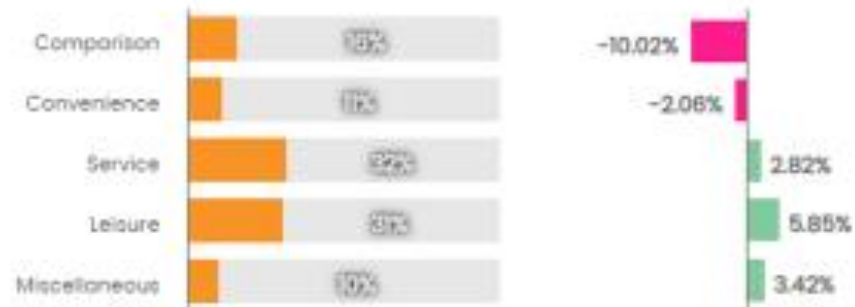
Classification Mix ⁱ



Cheadle

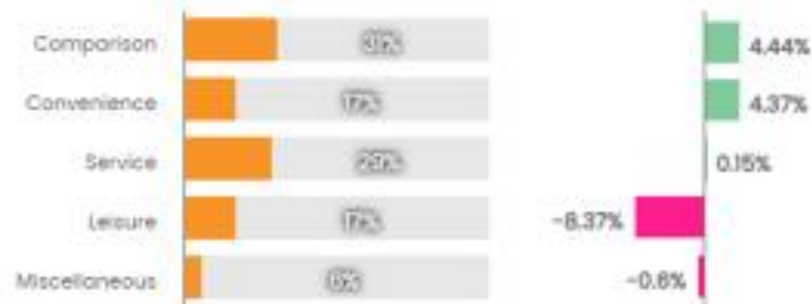


Classification Mix ①



Cheadle Hulme

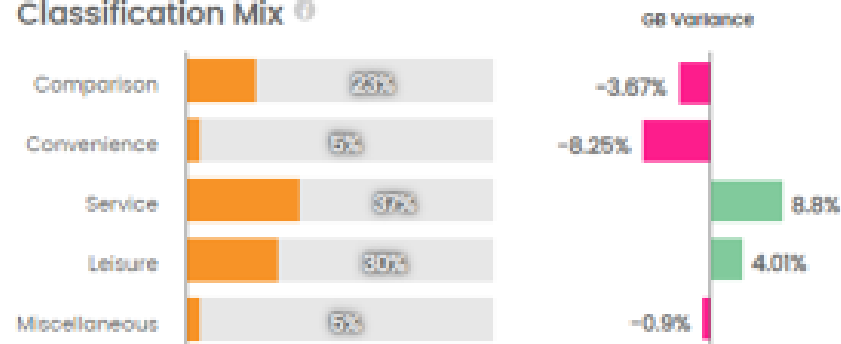
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Edgeley

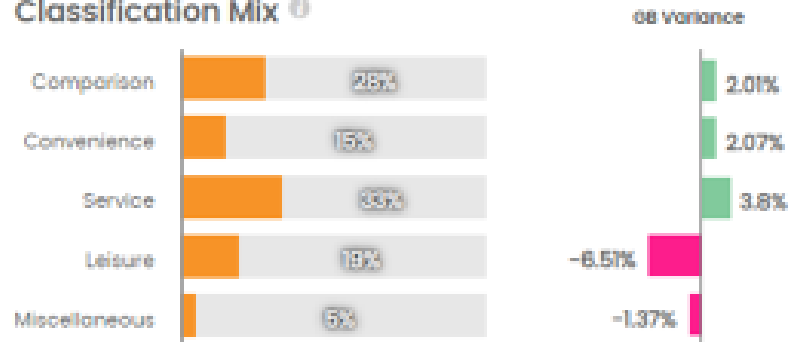


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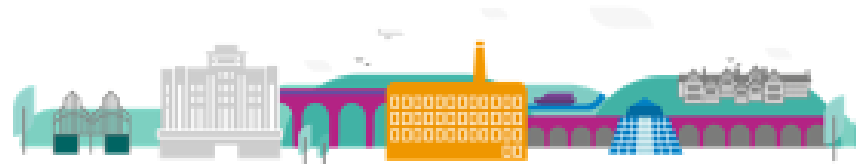


Hazel Grove

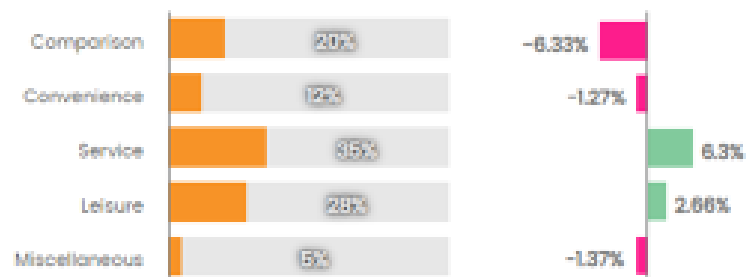
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Marple

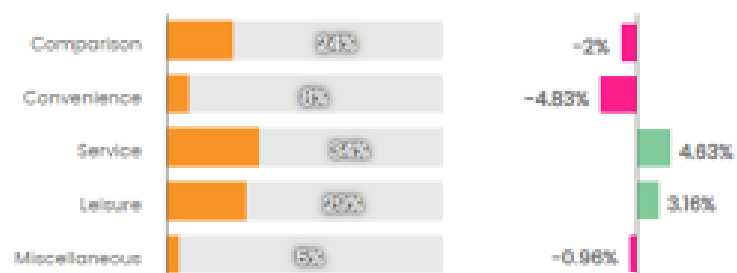


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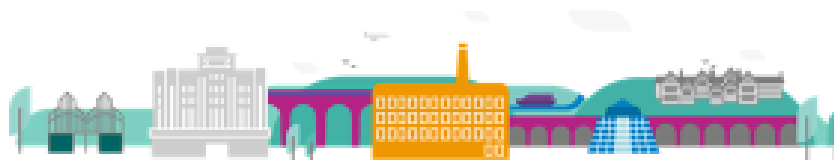


Reddish

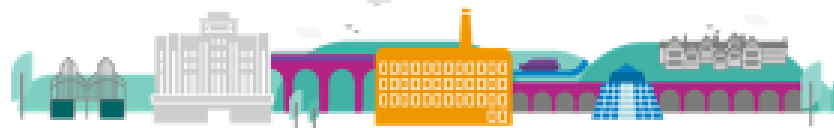
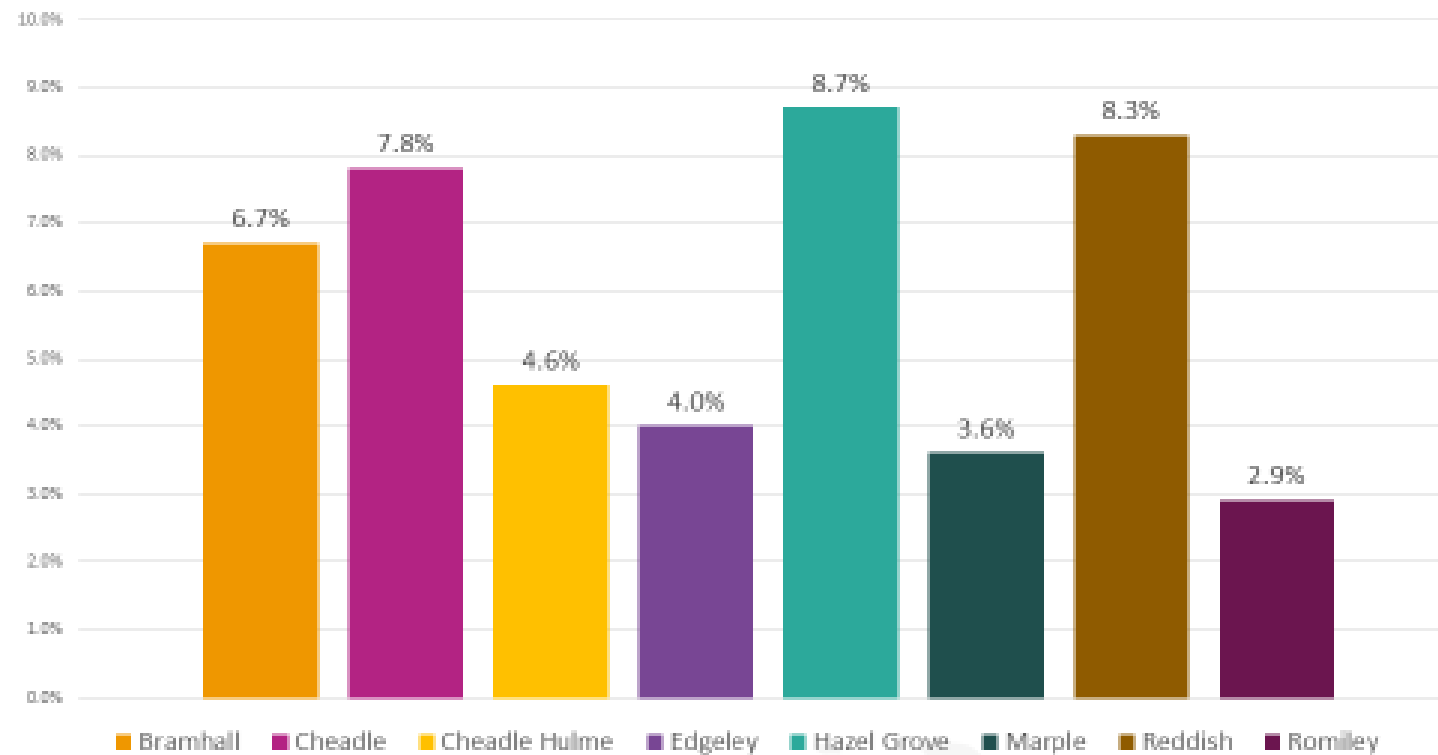
Classification Mix ①



Romiley



Current Vacancy Rates – *source LDC*



Independents v Multiples

