Buckingham Town Centre Study

Buckingham Town Council

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This town centre study has been commissioned by Buckingham Town Council with support from the Buckingham & Villages Community Board (Buckinghamshire Council).

The report is being prepared by Chris Wade of the People & Places Partnership, based on research and survey work undertaken in Buckingham during Summer 2023. The town centre customer profile has been prepared by Laura Harris of LH Analytics.

Background: Revitalising Town Centres

Background

Introduction

This proposal has been prepared by the People & Places Partnership as a basis for preparing an updated Town Centre Study for Buckingham town centre on behalf of Buckingham Town Council. This study will be developed from an evidence-based review of the Buckingham town centre and the two key beneficiary groups of town centre customers and businesses.

Buckingham Town Councils' requirements

A Buckingham Town Centre Retail Appraisal, Health Check and Opportunities Assessment was undertaken in 2016. Since this time the outlook for high streets has changed substantially, with major changes accelerated by Covid-19.

The last health check included: Consumer/customer insights; operator/business views; location review; commentary on outlook and growth; conclusions/summary of findings, including positive and negative indications of health and growth and improvement opportunities.

The Town Council has been asked to commission a Town Centre Study that updates this research, as well as providing options for the improvement or development of the town on behalf of Buckingham & Villages Community Board (Buckinghamshire Council).

The new Buckingham Town Centre Study report should include:

Baseline data, including consumer/customer and operator/business views and a location review. A comparison and judgement should be made about how well Buckingham's town centre is currently doing in comparison to the national picture. The Town Council will provide updated data on current business occupancy rates and the mix of retail types, for further analysis and comparison to national benchmarks.

Research for the report should minimally include a stakeholder workshop, to be held in Buckingham and involving a mixed group of public sector, private sector and third sector representatives. The Town Council will arrange the venue and invite attendees. The Town Council can also circulate surveys, or other consultation materials to relevant stakeholders, as required.

Ideas for growth and improvement. This could include: short, medium and long term options.

The study should also identify areas where the Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan could provide strength and support to the high street through local planning policy.

It is possible that there would be further work in one or more of the areas identified during the ideas for growth and improvement stage, and the successful applicant would be able to deliver this work too.

People & Places' approach

The People & Places Partnership offers a proven track-record of *bringing facts and faces to centres* through an evidenced-based, collaborative working method for enabling the revitalisation of town and city centres. People & Places have extensive experience of conducting research into town centre performance and perceptions; businesses confidence; stakeholder engagement; partnership development; town centre action planning and delivery; and performance monitoring.

In 2020, People & Places updated its earlier national *revitalising town centres toolkit*, prepared for the Local Government Association LGA). The toolkit provides local leaders with guidance on how to approach the revitalisation of town and city centres.

The methodology used by People & Places to develop the Buckingham Town Centre Study will adopt and adapt the approach created nationally as good practice in the LGA toolkit. In-line with the requirements of Buckingham Town Council, this methodology focuses on updating the 2016 Health Check with a focus that looks at 'retail and beyond'.

Characteritics of the Peole & Places' approach, specifically adapted to the brief provided by Buckingham Town Council and to advance the approach of the previous study to fit current circumsatances include:

- Structuring the proposal and associated costs as a menu of core and optional activities to enable the Town Council and partners to determine the appropriate approach and budget.
- Combining the use of secondary data and analytics to construct acustomer profile that can to diiferent degrees be comaparable with the 2016 study.
- Capturing primary survey data about customer use, perceptions and priorities for the town centre rather than relying soley on the perspective of operators businesses. People & Places' extensive experince shows that business and customer perspectives about town centres are often very different.
- Using the LGA's Revitalising Town Centre Checklist (see page 4) as a focus for survey work, analysis and recommendations to ensure that the proposed study looks beond retail-based solutions and towards factors that local leadership is able to address.
- Drawing on People & Places' previous experince of workinmg with the Neighbourhood Planning process to ensure the study adds to the undersrtanding of town centre issues and potential policy recommendations
- Helping the Town Council to work with Buckingham Copuncil and other partners local authorities to develop a 'Forward Framework' that focus on both the 'what' and the 'how' of town centre revitalisation.
- Working in a way that enable People & Places to work with trusted associates to help the Town Council deliver some initial projects in conjunction with local stakeholders.

The People and Places Partnership are creators of the Local Government Association's national revitalising town centres toolkit. This online toolkit provides practical guidance and resources to assist councils in taking a strategic and evidence-based approach to revitalising town centres. The updated version prepared by People & Places in summer 2020 includes newly available case studies and guidance to help local authorities and place partnerships to develop COVID-19 recovery planning as part of wider revitalisation.

The toolkit uses the town centre checklist developed by the People & Places Partnership for delivering the 'how' and the 'what' of town centre revitalisation. Councils can use the self-assessment 'town centre checklist' with partners, to regularly review progress in developing local policy and practice.

Key elements to consider in applying the town centre checklist are:

- Foundations: the process should be underpinned by an up-to-date review of existing strategies, collective objectives and evidence from recent surveys.
- Function: action planning begins with a clear statement of identified issues; recognition of council and partners' roles; creation of suitable responses; acknowledgment of gaps in delivery; identification of impact measures.
- Form and Folk: next comes the development of appropriate organisational 'form' to coordinate activity including defining the roles of key partners and wider stakeholder engagement through 'folk'.
- Finances: financial planning needs to include identifying opportunities for fund raising inward investment and partnership sustainability.
- Forward planning: finally, everything gets written down as a 'forward framework' and regularly reviewed.

The updated toolkit uses guidance on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic based on an adaptation of the Institute of Place Management's (IPM) national post-COVID 19 Recovery Framework. The IPM's post-COVID 19 Recovery Framework has much in common with the toolkit's approach. Essentially both frameworks place a strong emphasis on evidence-based planning and delivery whilst focusing on shaping the 'how' (partnership development) and 'what' (action planning & delivery) of recovery/revitalisation. Both frameworks recognise the key roles of local coordination and communication in delivering successful town and city centre outcomes.

LGA Revitalising Town Centres Checklist	
FOUNDATION	
Evidence and objectives	Has a baseline survey of issues been completed including COVID-19 impacts, objectives defined and short/long-term outcome monitoring 'dashboard' agreed?
FUNCTION	
Travel, parking, and access	Is an integrated town centre travel, parking and access strategy in place with immediate social distancing measures and transition to increased sustainability?
Planning and property	Are town-centre-first policies, master-planning or asset management in place that take account of COVID-19 impacts and engage businesses and landlords?
Streetscape and public realm	Has a prioritised streetscape and public realm improvement plan been agreed that facilitates social distancing and increases long-term, cross-town foot-flow?
Business support	Is there tailored mentoring and support to enhance the quality, performance and distinctiveness of businesses based on recovery needs and future trends?
Place branding and marketing	Is there a clear understanding of the town brand with pooled resources and a creative, collective campaign offering reassurance to existing and new markets?
Digital tech and data	Is there an assessment of digital infrastructure and skills with an investment plan for the collective use of data in marketing and monitoring the town centre?
FORM	
Governance and influence	Is there an appropriate structure, membership and credibility to coordinate local stakeholder activity and influence cross-departmental or strategic partnerships?
FOLK	
Community engagement and coordination	Is there strong public, private and community engagement with active and coordinated involvement in planning and delivery that extends to community assets development and is backed by a clear communications plan?
Capacity mapping and team building	Are there an effective chair, suitably skilled board, employment of necessary staff, effective management of trained volunteers and established relationships for joint working with other stakeholder groups?
FUNDING	
Finances and investment	Is there an organisation with robust financial procedures and strategy agreed for diverse and sustainable fund raising and income to support a town centre? Is it 'run as a business' with inter-relationships understood and investment secured?
FORWARD PLANNING	
Strategy and plans	Is there a well-defined 'forward framework' comprising an overarching vision/strategy, a rolling organisational business plan and a parallel action plan coordinating and monitoring delivery on the ground?

Methodology

The methodology proposed here to prepare the Buckingham Town Centre Study has six key elements reflecting the requirements in the brief blended with People & Places' tried and tested approach used in the LGA toolkit.

1. *Analysis of Existing Evidence & Strategies*

It is proposed that the work commences with a desktop review and analysis of existing and emerging local strategies, reports and available data relating to Buckingham town centre. This will include liaison with the Town Council and Neighbourhood Planning group to understand previous and ongoing research and plan development.

As part of this initial analysis, People & Places will assess business mix and vacancy data provided by Buckingham Town Council's Town Centre Manager. This will use a detailed business use class classification system and record ownership types and vacant premises. This data can be compared against People & Places' national benchmarks to help understand the town's business mix and evolving function.

This business survey will help meet the Town Council's requirement to 'look beyond retail' and examine the changing categories and portfolio of retail, hospitality, office and professional services businesses in the town and how this may look for the next five years. It will include the split of independent and national businesses (franchises included) and any impact of rental costs and rates on the businesses that do or do not maintain a presence in the town.

The assessment of the business mix will also help provide evidence of any change to the function and performance of Buckingham town centre in light of increasing online sales versus in-store sales and the emergence of new hospitality delivery services. With a shift to working from home for some Buckingham residents, the impact on Buckingham for different businesses or services on the High Street will also be anticipated.

It is suggested that this desktop review and business mix analysis, will be supplemented by an initial interactive, briefing(s) to key stakeholders including representatives of Town Council, Neighbourhood Plan Group, Buckingham Council officers, business representatives, and civic groups organised by Town Council. From People & Places' experience, such an introductory briefing will be important in achieving 'buy-in' to the process at an early stage.

The initial online briefing(s) will present an objective overview of the methodology and purpose of the study, to assist in developing ongoing, local engagement with businesses and other key stakeholders. This will help gain support for the objectives of the study in a way that will help achieve wide buy-in to the final study findings and 'forward framework'. This short, initial briefing(s) is intended to be in addition to the later in-person stakeholder workshop required by the brief.

In these initial meetings, People & Places will brief stakeholders on the importance of addressing both the 'what' and the 'how' of recovery planning and revitalisation. Partners and stakeholder groups will be prompted to begin reflecting on the potential future roles of their organisations in supporting the delivery of a cohesive Buckingham Recovery Strategy.

In this initial stage and throughout this work to develop the Buckingham Town Centre Study, People & Places will operate in an iterative way that reflects phased findings back to the

Town Council, partners and wider stakeholders through an engaging process. A stage 1 report will be prepared and shared with the Town Council at the end of phase of the work.

2. *Preparation of Town Centre Customer Profile with Secondary Data Analytics*

People & Places have teamed-up with LH Analytics to develop this proposal and deliver the study in a way in which it will create a town centre customer profile based on available secondary data. LH Analytics is a small and friendly data and location analytics consultancy which assists town and their businesses to better understand customers.

Using customer journey and location analytics, LH Analytics can give clear insights about growth and diversification, by understanding a town's customers or footfall, catchment, population and market characteristics.

As part of the core proposal, it is recommended that LH Analytics prepare a drivetime analysis for Buckingham town centre. This will provide an overview of the town's catchment that can provide a context for more subsequent primary research of local customers and their perceptions and priorities for the town centre. This drive time analysis will include:

- 5,10,15,20,25-minute drivetimes around the town centres with map of catchments,
- Census information on size of population age and ethnicity profile
- average Income

3. *Undertaking Town Centre Assets and Stakeholder Surveys*

To help objectively understand Buckingham town centre, the People & Places Partnership propose to adapt its national town centre baseline survey process that forms part of the LGA toolkit.

This tried and tested, nationally-used survey process enables the monitoring and analysis of town centre performance and key stakeholder perceptions. The purpose of the monitoring process is to collect standardised key performance indicators (KPIs) to help local organisations and businesses to better understand the function, trends and issues facing the town centre and its potential relative to similar towns elsewhere. Key components of the Buckingham town centre baseline survey will be a town centre customer and business surveys.

Evidence from such detailed surveys will help support a reasoned, evidence-based discussion of key stakeholders' priorities and facilitate involvement in preparing and delivering a Buckingham Town Centre 'forward framework' of initial recommendations. The approach will help in strengthening the collective understanding of the role of the town centre as a retail destination and local community hub.

The Place

3a. The Mix of Businesses & Services

To help understand the scale and variety of businesses and services in a town centre, data made available by Buckingham Town Council about the mix of town centre businesses and services in 2019 and 2023 will be assessed. This offers the opportunity to gain insights during a period when already significant trends were heightened by the pandemic and greater flexibility in the way the mix could be curated through the planning system. It is key to understand these trends as a pointer to the incentives and controls that can and should be employed to maintain the critical mass of Buckingham's town centre mix of businesses and services.

3b. Town Centre Access and Movement

As part of a town centre visit, an initial audit will be undertaken of town centre arrival points, access routes, sightlines and signage. This information will be helpful in determining the way customers access and move around the different parts of the town centre and the impact vitality of Buckingham.

The People

3c. Town Centre Business Confidence Survey

People & Places will adapt its tried and tested business survey in a way that enables benchmarking with other towns and comparison with the 2016 study. This business survey will also follow the customer surveys so that it might adapt and test some of the findings from the analysis of customers' perspectives.

The core proposal and costs presented here allow for the preparation and distribution of an online 'business confidence survey' that will be made available to every customer facing, town centre business and organisation using social media accounts and email contacts made available by Buckingham Town Council and partners. The short survey will be used to gauge businesses' perceptions of trading in the town centre and get a sense of their collective future priorities for helping to boost its economic performance.

This proposal allows for the option of the survey to be produced and distributed in a paper format if this is preferred. Using this approach, every business will be visited up to three times with the option of an online version also provided. This face-to-face approach could equally be used to capture the responses of those businesses and organisations that did not respond to an initial online version.

As an adjunct to the business confidence and town centre business survey, preliminary questions will be asked about Buckingham's digital infrastructure and the different perspectives on services such as social media channels; targeted marketing by businesses; web site development and online browsing/sales.

3d. Town Centre Customer Survey

People & Places will work with the Town Council and Neighbourhood Planning group, to agree a town centre customer survey that complements and adds to research already undertaken about residents' perceptions of the town centre.

People & Places' extensive experience shows that business and customer perspectives about town centres are often very different. Distinct from the previous study, this approach therefore does not rely on an understanding of customers' use of the town centre gathered indirectly from businesses. It will also survey their views on a wide-range of issues that looks beyond retail alone as an inspiration for customers to use the wider town centre.

This approach gives more specific information about local customers perceptions and use of the town centre than could be gleaned from depending solely on secondary data to prepare a customer profile.

A link to an online town centre users' survey will be distributed through Town Council and partners social media accounts to gauge the perceptions, profile and priorities of different types of town centre customers.

4. *Stakeholder Engagement and Publication of Final Study Report*

Based on the findings of the desktop review, initial stakeholder engagement and surveys, People & Places will take the lead in initial action planning with the Council, its partners and stakeholders.

The action planning process will use the structure of the town centre checklist contained within the LGA's revitalising town centres toolkit. This enables a comprehensive and integrated response in providing practical suggestions for ensuring Buckingham's daytime and nighttime economies evolve in concert to maximise the draw of the town centre and aid its post-pandemic recovery.

This process will be initiated through the preparation of a Buckingham Town Centre Forward Framework. The key to the approach advocated by the People and Places Partnership is to have a seamless thread running through evidence of issues, responses and measures of impact. This forward framework can be produced to suggest immediate (6 months), short-term (12-24 months) and medium-term (up to five years) actions. Reference will be inbuilt to the latest thinking and best practice on a comprehensive range of issues.

The findings from the study and the initial Buckingham Town Centre Forward Framework will be shared at an in-person meeting of key town centre stakeholders from a mixed group of public sector, private sector and third sector representatives.

After feedback from the meeting, the Forward Framework will be expanded as the final section of the evolving Buckingham Town Centre Study. The proposal includes the option for graphically-designed shorter to be produced for stakeholders.

Review: Existing Strategies

Initial stakeholder engagement was supplemented by a desktop review and analysis of existing local strategies and reports relating to Buckingham town centre. These key existing strategies are:

- Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan (2015)
- Buckingham Neighbourhood Development Plan (2015)
- Buckingham Town Centre Retail Appraisal, Health Check and Opportunities Assessment (2016)

Review of policies relating to town centre role

Local Plan

It is important for the future development of town centres to be driven by a collective future vision and understanding of their evolving function.

The legacy Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan (VALP) published in 2013 by the then Aylesbury Vale District Council offered the following description of how Buckingham town centre could be directed to evolve:

"*Buckingham town centre also needs to build on its programme of regeneration to maximise the benefits continuing growth can bring, and to support the level of jobs and homes growth proposed for the northern part of Aylesbury Vale. Growth of the university campus is likely to play a role in this. Some of these issues are addressed in the made Buckingham Neighbourhood Plan. It sets out policies to revitalise and grow Buckingham town centre.*"

A specific policy for town, village and local centres to support new and existing communities, stated that that the then district council will promote the sustainable growth and regeneration of Aylesbury, Buckingham and three smaller town centres. Within defined town centres, development proposals for retail, leisure, commercial, office, tourism, cultural, community and residential development would be supported where they:

a. retain or enhance the town centre's historic character and appearance, vitality and viability
b. sustain or enhance diverse town centre uses and customer choice, incorporating residential accommodation above ground floor level where possible, and
c. are readily accessible by public transport, walking and cycling.

The policy stated that proposals for town centre uses should be sited within the town or local centres. Proposals for development in and around town centres, including proposals for changes of use, should support the aspirations for regeneration of those centres including those subject to neighbourhood plans by improving the range and quality of retail, public realm, leisure, employment and training opportunities.

The VALP was officially adopted by the newly formed Buckinghamshire Council in 2021, in lieu of the existence then of a new county-wide Local Plan.

Buckinghamshire Council is committed to produce a new Local Plan within five years of coming into being, that is, by April 2025. It states that the new Local Plan will aim to deliver sustainable development by meeting social, economic, and environmental needs to bring benefits for people who live, work, or visit, through:

- making sure there are enough of the right homes and workplaces
- getting the infrastructure in the right place at the right time
- delivering better deals from developers on the obligations arising from their proposals

Neighbourhood Development Plan

Buckingham's Neighbourhood Development Plan (BNDP) became a legal document in 2015, after approval in a town-wide referendum. Its policies have been used in planning decisions for Buckingham since then.

The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group and Town Council have recognised that since 2015 there have been many changes including that the town's population has increased, from the 12,000 of the 2011 census to more than 14,000 in the 2021 census, and today is heading towards 16,000 as further housing developments are completed.

Due to this, Buckingham Town Council are working to refresh the Neighbourhood Plan to ensure that it works towards building a future Buckingham that suits also its residents, businesses and visitors. The new plan will set out fresh policy ideas to ensure the vibrancy of our historic market town.

The overarching vision of the 2015 Buckingham Neighbourhood Plan was to "make Buckingham a better place to live, work, study and play". It was recognised that this must be achieved in the context of sustainable growth. The Plan identified six themes as important for delivering this vision:

- Housing and phasing
- Design, heritage and environment
- Culture, leisure, health
- Economy and education
- Infrastructure
- Developer contributions

These themes encapsulated 12 objectives which were identified to ensure that the Plan makes Buckingham a better place to live, work, study and play. It is possible to recognise objectives which have a primary and secondary relationship with guiding revitalisation of the town centre.

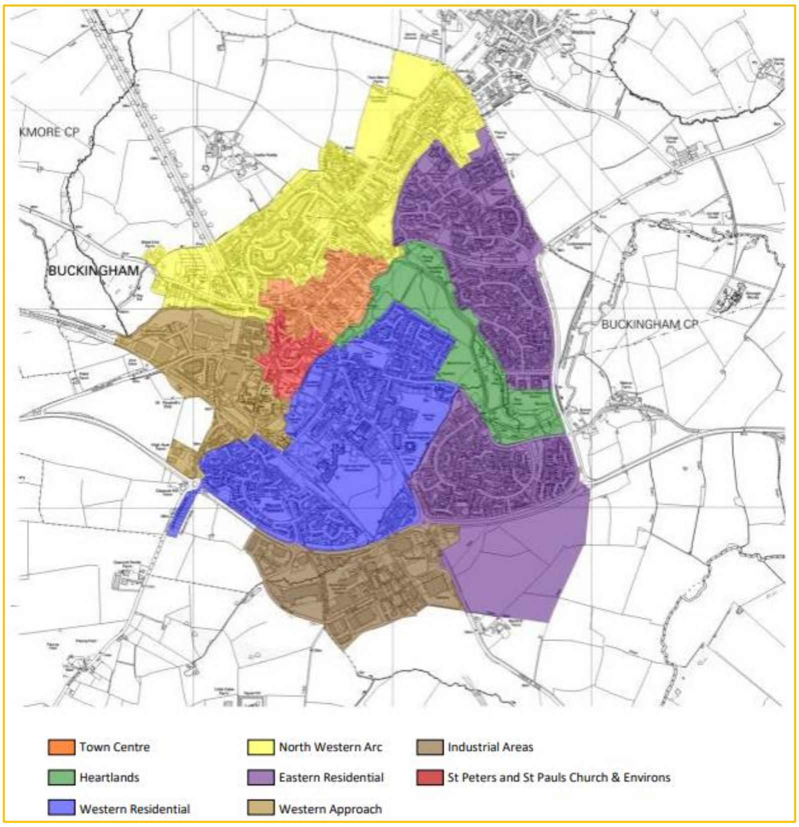
Primary: Foster the economic development of the town and its hinterland by providing employment-led growth, increasing the town's appeal to tourists and invigorating the town centre.

Secondary

- Conserve and enhance the town's historic environment and its setting.

- Encourage development that strengthens culture, leisure, sport and play facilities in the town.
- Maintain the quality of Buckingham's parkland and green space, in particular its 'green heart'.
- Improve movement into and around the town in a healthy and safe manner. Specifically promoting cycling, walking and ease of access for the disabled.

The Plan also identified eight distinct character areas including the town centre (see map opposite). This is described as forming the central focus of the town that contains many historic buildings and frontages including a number of listed buildings. This provides a wide variety of architectural styles and a mixture of residential and business use. The mix of residential housing includes retirement flats and flats and houses catering for a wide range of ages and lifestyles. It provides a focal point for the town with connected streets.



Projecting forward, the 2015 Neighbourhood Plan stated that through its policies "*the town will have grown. New people, employment and retail have come to the town. However, the traditions of Buckingham have been kept alive. The development which has taken place in the town centre has been complementary to the existing building scape. This has enabled the town to conserve and enhance the town's historic environment and its setting.*

The new residents and retail in the town centre will have contributed to the continuation of the town's markets and ensuring Buckingham continues as a market town well into the future."

In Buckingham in 2031 there will be:

- An additional 617 dwellings excluding existing commitments
- An additional 400 rooms to accommodate the expansion of Buckingham University
- 10 hectares of new employment land

As the town centre insert plan shows, the 2015 Neighbourhood Plan envisaged that retail expansion would be a key part of town centre development.

Town centre economy

Specific town centre policies and proposals included as part of the economy and education section of the plan include:

- EE2: The allocation of land for retail, office and mixed development will be supported, with three potential sites identified.
- EE3: Applications will be supported for new town centre commercial uses.
- EE4: Retain and enhance both the primary and secondary retail frontages, including the restriction of professional services and hospitality to 35% of the primary retail frontages.
- EE5: Provision for additional town centre car parking as provided at Stratford Fields and on the site now occupied by Regents Gate.

Town Centre Insert Map

Figure 4.3

Proposed Local Designated Green · Health Facility · Proposed Car Park · Proposed Housing Development · Proposed Retail Development

Housing

The section on housing and phasing included:

- HP1: Allocate land for 617 new dwellings including 589 homes clustered along Tingewick Road that have been developed at sites G, H, I and J shown on development plan map overleaf.

Environment and heritage

The section on design, heritage and environment is very strong on safeguarding the natural environment and biodiversity though omits policies and proposals for conserving and enhancing Buckingham's built heritage, historic setting and public spaces.

Culture and leisure

In addition, the culture, leisure and health section included:

- CLH4: Provision of new or extended health care facilities on two existing sites at the Community Hospital and on Verney Close.
- CLH5: Identified green and open spaces will be protected and retained as designated Local Green Space.
- A 'Community Action' to produce a Community Building Strategy including proposals for a new cultural arts venue, sports facilities, a community building and a venue for religious services.

Investment in infrastructure

The section on infrastructure prides a clear objective to improve movement into and around the town in a healthy and safe manner, by promoting cycling, walking and ease of access for the disabled.

There is a community commitment that the Town Council strongly supports the provision of good connections, via pedestrian and cycle links. "Good connections" is defined as keep changes of levels and road crossings to a minimum and as part direct routes, with adequate widths to enable passing of cycles, wheel chairs and/or mobility scooters and made of a suitable material to allow easy access.

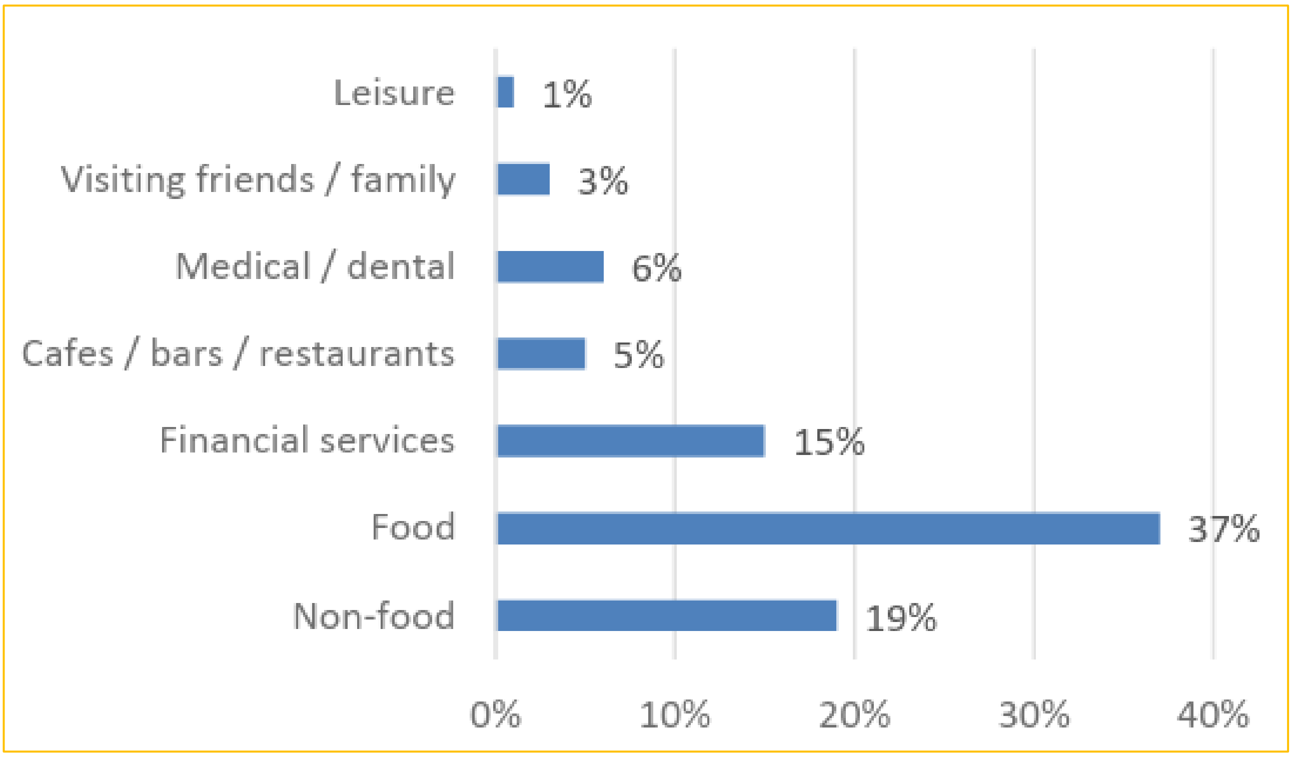
The section included a specific policy commitment that covers such good connections in-part:

I1: Pedestrian routes should be made suitable for disabled access, including the provision of seating as rest points.

Developer contributions

This section includes a recommended community action to seek contributions towards providing new pedestrian and cycle links within and beyond the town boundary that incorporate new and existing residential developments. It was also proposed that improved public transport could be provided along Tingewick Road that encompasses new developments.

Retail Appraisal, Health Check and Opportunities Assessment



This assessment drew on a 2015 retail study for its consumer profile. Key points were:

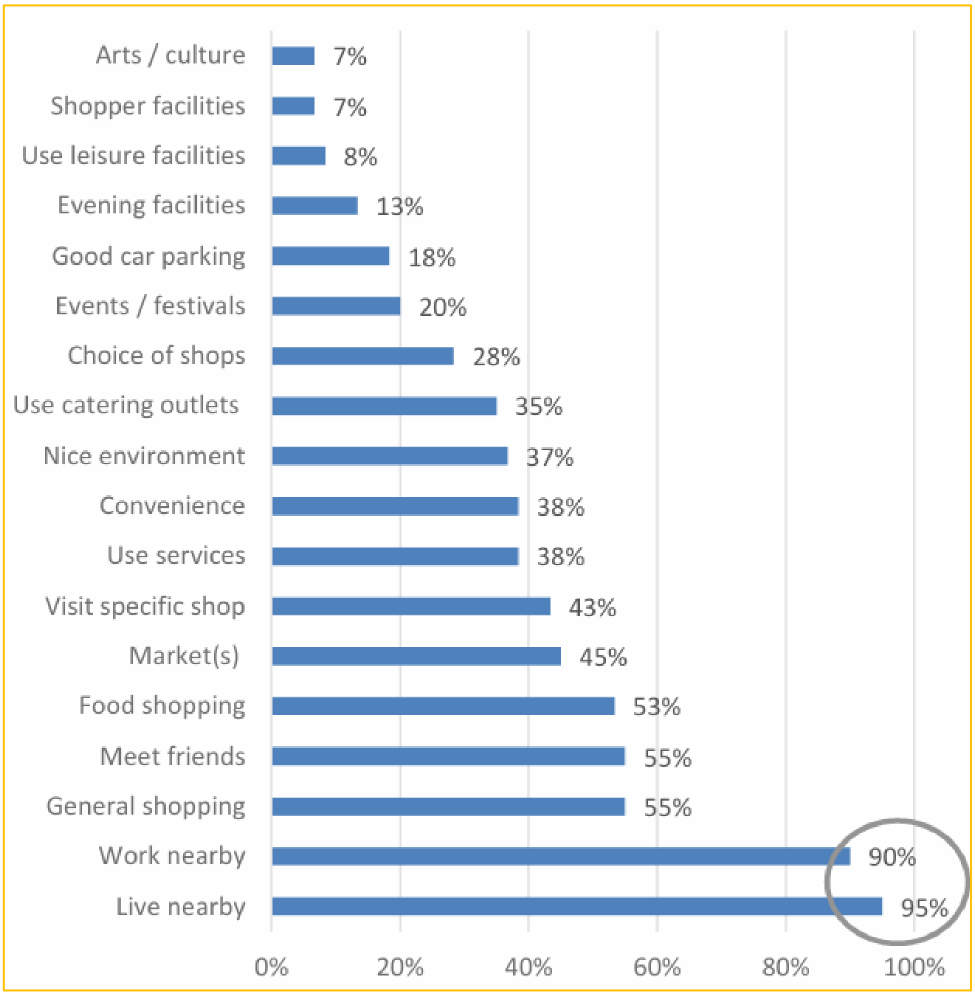
- residents from the town (88%) and surrounding area (72%) cited Buckingham as their most often visited destination.

- 75% visit once a week or more frequently and appear to be visiting primarily for food shopping.
- Buckingham is used by a high proportion of residents (56%) and to a lesser extent customers from surrounding areas (33%) for restaurants.

The Assessment used the Acorn is a lifestyle classification system developed by CACI to offer insights on the resident population. This identified that Buckingham's residents are dominated by the affluent and comfortably off lifestyle sectors. Both the Buckingham Soth and North wards were dominoed by *Wealthy Achievers* (30% & 61%) and the *Comfortably Off* (27% & 25%), respectively. The former group are typically discerning consumers with mid to upmarket tastes and want good quality and good service over price. The latter group seemingly have good available disposable income, are aspirational and brand aware, whilst looking for good choice and customer service.

Primary research was undertaken into businesses' attitudes and their perceptions of customers' behaviour.

The survey captured businesses' perceptions about why customers visit the town centre. The primary reason was perceived as the convenience of its location , whilst over half of businesses cited secondary reasons including general shopping, meeting friends and food shopping.



Businesses also shared their perceptions of different town centre attributes (see table overleaf). Attributes weighted towards the 'poor' end of the scale were parking provision, destination stores, retail mix / offer and promotional activity. By comparison the more positive attributes were; quality of environment, catering mix / offer, and customer experience.

	1 Poor	2	3	4	5 Good	No Reply
Facilities	12%	25%	50%	7%	2%	5%
Retail mix / offer	12%	22%	47%	10%	5%	5%
Catering mix / offer	0%	8%	23%	43%	18%	7%
Parking provision	25%	20%	30%	12%	10%	3%
Destination stores	17%	23%	32%	7%	2%	18%
Customer experience	0%	10%	30%	38%	12%	10%
Ease of use	3%	12%	30%	35%	7%	13%
Promotional activity	8%	28%	40%	12%	2%	10%
Quality of environment	2%	7%	18%	52%	15%	7%

Through consultation on the Buckingham Town Centre Retail Appraisal, Health Check and Opportunities Assessment , it was determined that there would also be significant new retail areas and leisure facilities in the town centre.

At the time it was envisaged that the demand for more retail provision in the town centre would increase, factoring in the increase in population associated with the new housing developments were factored in. The increase in people was considered to mean a further demand for retail shops in the town centre and retention of existing retail uses.

This would be alongside:

- New community facilities:
- New sport facilities
- New and improved transport connections
- New green spaces
- New Cemetery and allotments

This Town Centre Retail Appraisal proposed that:

"The opportunity for Buckingham lies in further strengthening the local role it fulfils, both for shopping and socialising, while improving the offer and environment to increase its appeal to all its potential customer groups and encourage further usage (frequency, length of stay and wider town centre offer)."

The Retail Appraisal and Health Check wrote about development opportunities rather than recommended actions. The presented overview was that opportunity for Buckingham lies in further strengthening the local role it fulfils, both for shopping and socialising, while improving the offer and environment. It was envisaged that this would increase its appeal to all its potential customer groups and encourage further usage. Points that remain pertinent to review today are included:

- better promotion is needed about the town's 'success' in response to a perception that it is not doing well.
- important to build on the positives such as the role as a meeting place with a good social and food offer, including markets.
- recognised weaknesses to overcome included parking provision and the mix of shops
- add 5-6 units in total to provide larger premises through planned / facilitated development or consolidation of units.
- increase shops with appeal to younger shoppers and expand food and beverage offer with 2-3 brands.
- improve quality and promotion of markets.
- carry-out a signage review 'to promote and remind' as well as integrate all areas.

Buckingham Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan -Lite

The Buckingham Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan -Lite (LCWIP-lite) extracts and updates the active travel routes identified in the Buckingham Transport Strategy from 2016, with the objective of increasing the mode share for walking and cycling in Buckingham. The proposed routes include a comprehensive network of walking and cycling routes in the town that connect residential areas the town centre. The routes identified should be considered as indicative routes to cater for existing and future active travel demand though have not yet been assessed in detail. Through further consultation with stakeholders, the routes will be refined at the next stage of LCWIP development, and high-level recommendations for improvement will be developed and prioritised for implementation.

Figure 6.1 (overleaf) is taken from the LCWIP-lite and identified what has been delivered since the Transport Strategy was published in 2016 and where there are commitments of developer funding, or where improvements are forthcoming. The proposed network improvements included existing facilities and a combination of off-road routes along busier corridors and on-road cycling in quieter streets and where available width for off-carriageway provision is constrained.

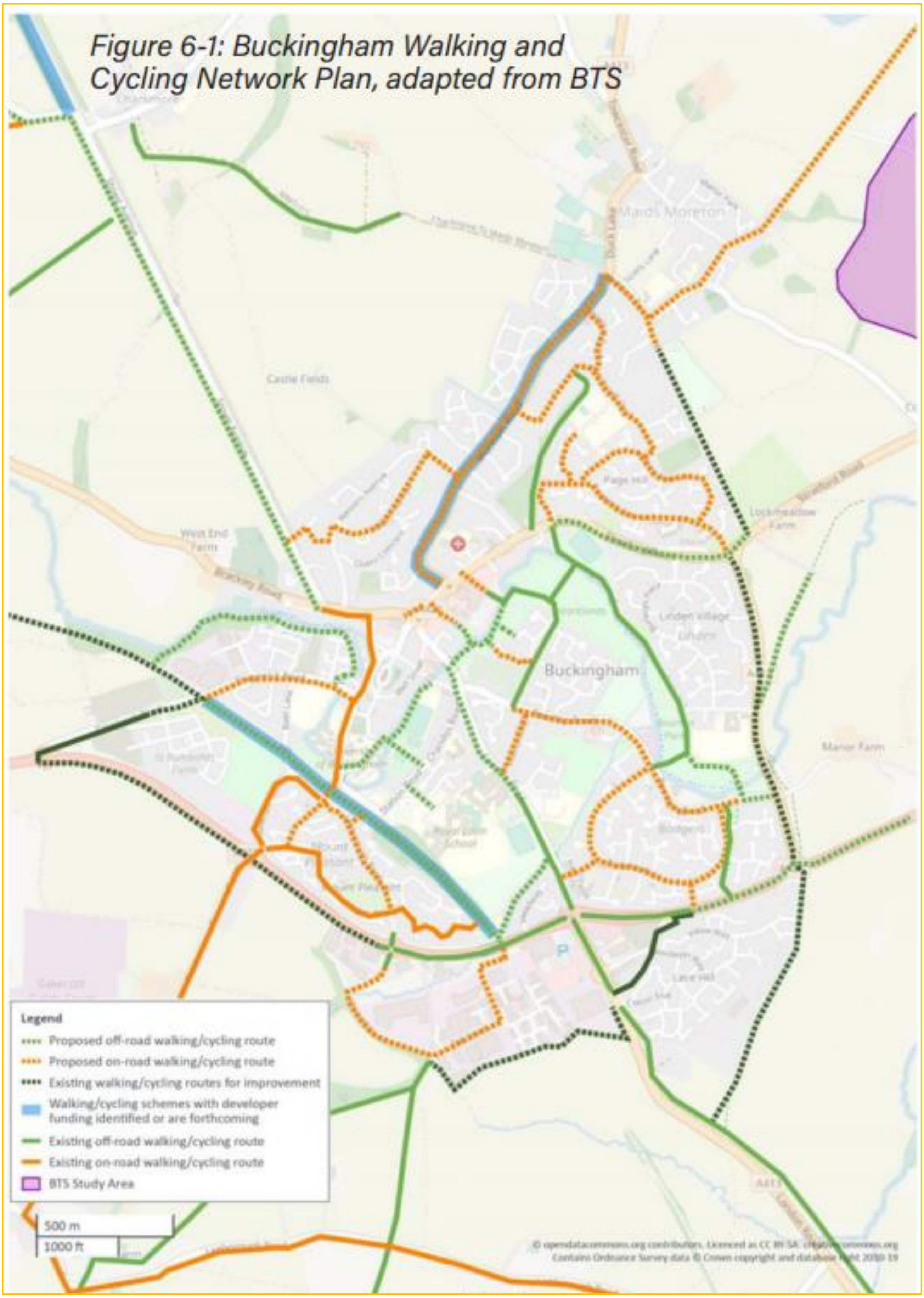


Figure 6-1: Buckingham Walking and Cycling Network Plan, adapted from BTS

Analytics: Town Centre Customer Profile

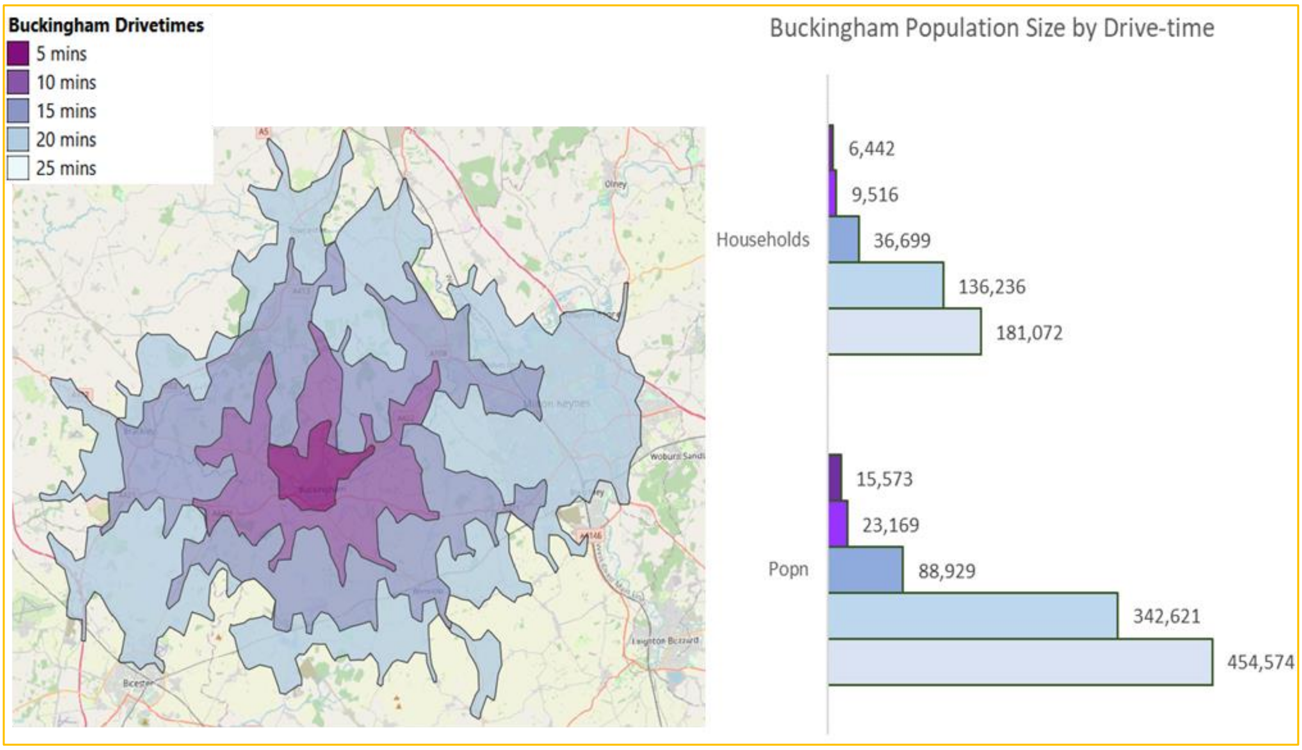
An updated town centre potential customer profile was prepared based on available secondary data. The aim is that using customer journey and location analytics, clear insights can be provided about growth and diversification opportunities, the potential for increases in footfall, the expansion of the Buckingham's catchment area and its market characteristics.

The summary analytics on the subsequent pages cover:

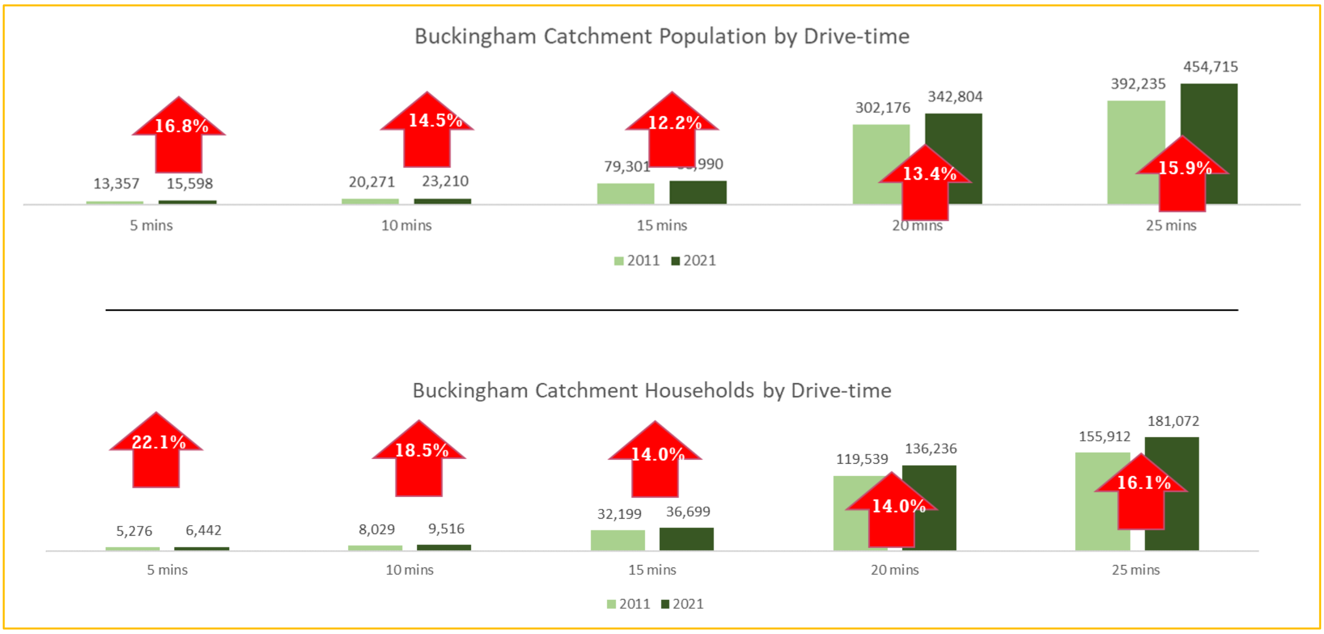
- Buckingham prospect population size by drive-time isochrone
- Buckingham census stats (2011 vs 2021) – by drive-time
- Buckingham census stats (2011 vs 2021) – residents living within a 5-minute drive-time
- The average income after household costs
- Buckingham sub regional towns by drive-time
- Buckingham competing towns by drive-time
- Buckingham competing towns and their drive-times

See analysis overleaf.

Buckingham Prospect Population Size by Drive-time Isochrone

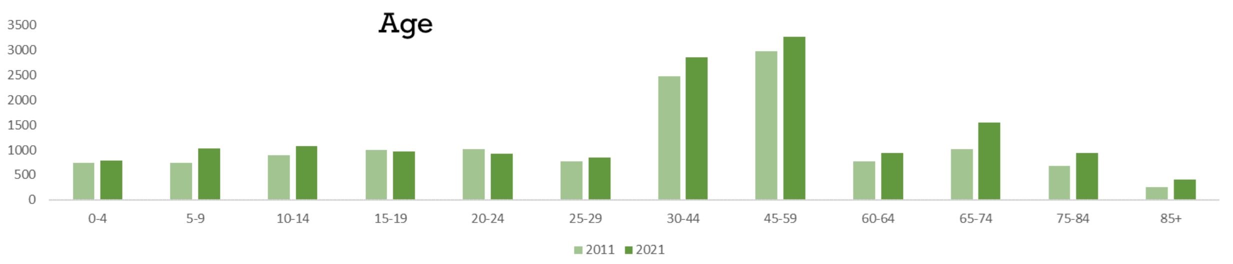


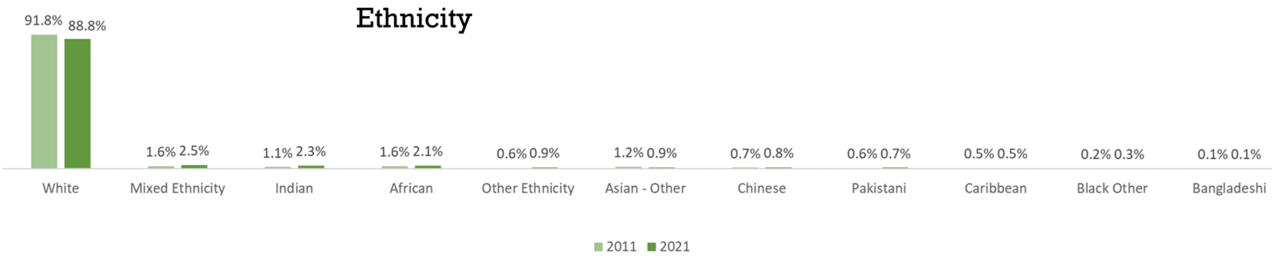
Buckingham Census Stats (2011 Vs 2021) – by Drive-time



The analysis of the Buckingham prospect population size by drive-time shows that there is a population of nearly half a million (454,574) potential customers within a 25-minute drive. Comparison between the 2011 and 2021 Census data shows that this catchment population has grown by a significant 16% (62,480).

Buckingham Census Stats (2011 Vs 2021) – Local Residents living within a 5 Minute Drive-time





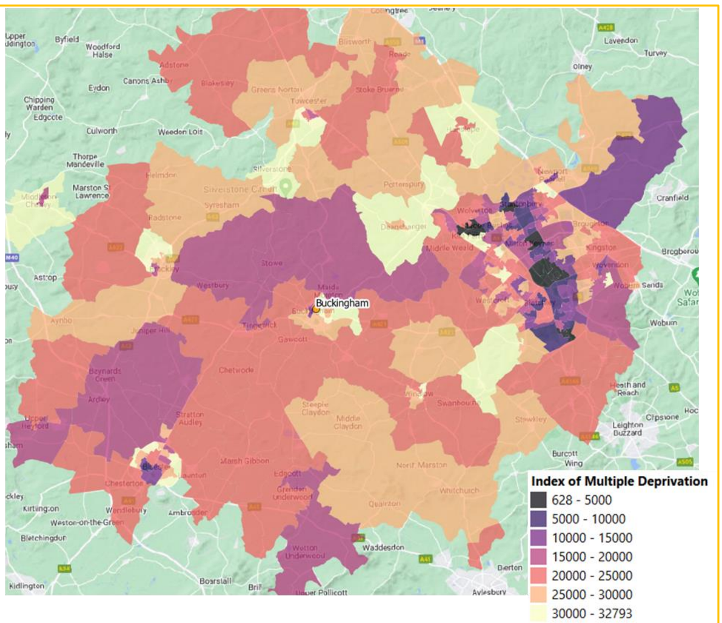
Buckingham – The Index of Multiple Deprivation

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) ranks every small area in England from 1 (most deprived area) to 32,844 (least deprived area).

The IMD combines information from the seven domains to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation. The domains are combined using the following weights:

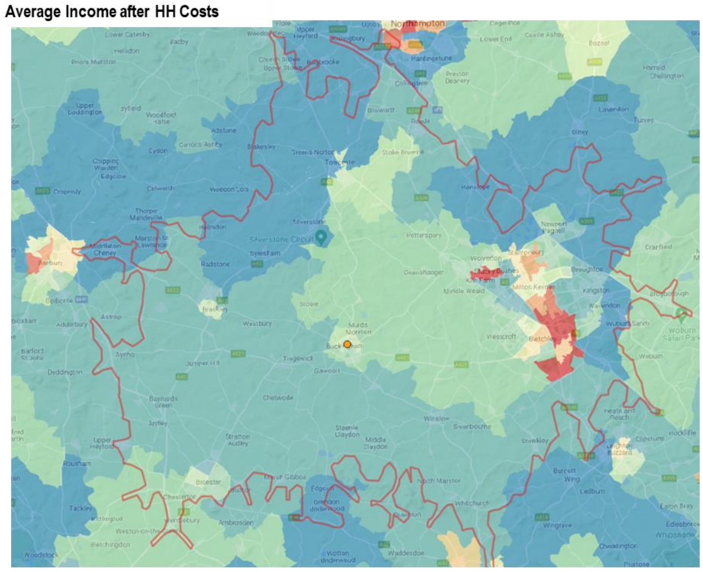
- Income Deprivation (22.5%)
- Employment Deprivation (22.5%)
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation (13.5%)
- Health Deprivation and Disability (13.5%)
- Crime (9.3%)
- Barriers to Housing and Services (9.3%)
- Living Environment Deprivation (9.3%

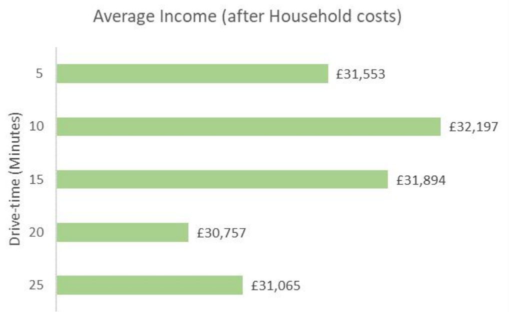
The Population in the Catchment around Buckingham is predominantly less deprived.
In areas on the outskirts of Milton Keynes, on the edge of the Buckingham Catchment at around 20 Minute Drive, there are some small areas that fall into the more deprived areas.



Analysis of Census statistics for residents living within a 5-minute drive-time shows that there has been an increase for all age categories except 15 to 24 year-olds. The ethnic mix of Buckingham's catchment population has seen an increase in diversity with increases across arrange of different ethnic groups including Indian increasing the most from 1.1% to 2.3%. In terms of indices of multiple deprivation, Buckingham's catchment area is predominantly less-deprived though there are some small areas of deprivation within a 20-minute drive.

Buckingham – The Average Income After Household Costs

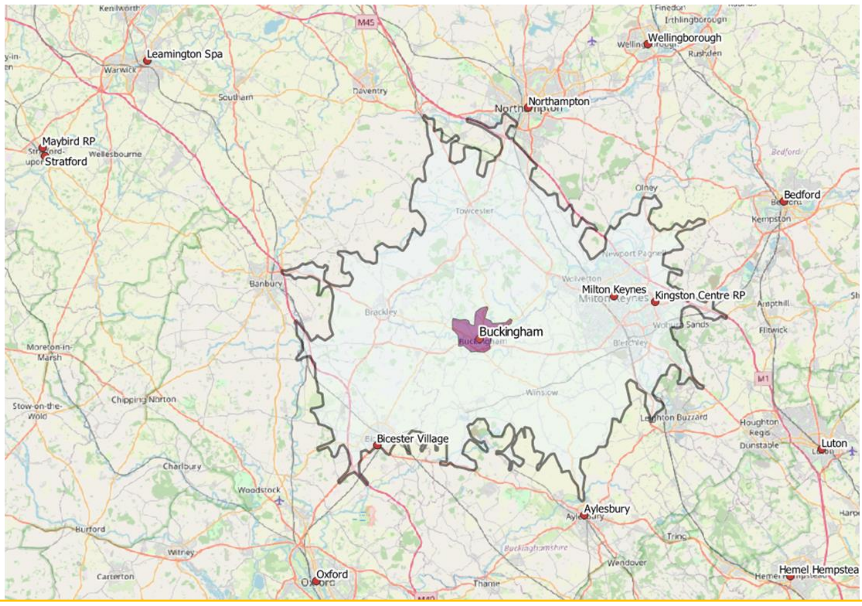




Overall the 2019 average income in the 5 minute drivetime is £31.6K after household costs, and £32.2K in the 10 minute drivetime.

These incomes are within the top 30% of the country, and the average income in the 10,15 and 25 minute is in the top 25% of the country.

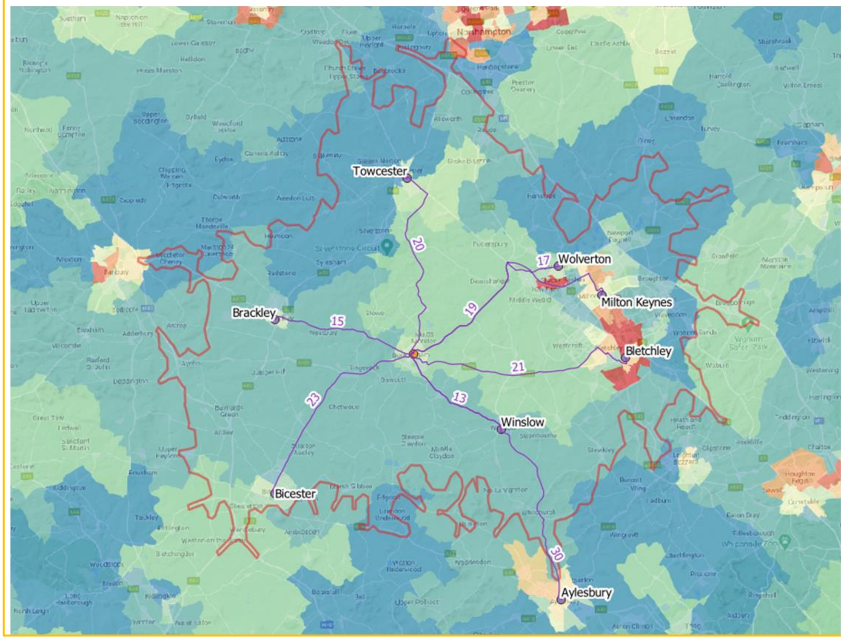
Buckingham Sub Regional Towns by Drive-Time



To...	Drive-time	Distance (Km)
Milton Keynes	18	22.4
Kingston Centre RP	21	28.1
Bicester Village	30	19.8
Aylesbury	30	27.4
Northampton	31	33.2
Bedford	38	46.0
Wellingborough	42	49.6
Oxford	43	45.0
Luton	43	57.5
Rugby	48	60.3
Hemel Hempstead	50	53.5
St Albans	52	71.9
Hitchin	53	63.3
Maybird RP	54	67.6
Stratford	55	66.9
High Wycombe	56	77.8
Leamington Spa	56	58.9
Watford	57	82.9
Hatfield Galleria	58	84.3
Coventry	63	77.2
Roaring Meg RP	63	74.8
Cambridge	73	99.2
Cirencester	77	97.0
Cheltenham	80	102.6

Analysis of average income after household costs show that in the 10, 15 and 25 minute drivetime catchments, they are in the top 25% in the country. Assessment of the Buckingham sub-regional retail destinations by drive-time indicates that Milton Keynes is the key centre within Buckingham's catchment area, along with the Kingston shopping centre.

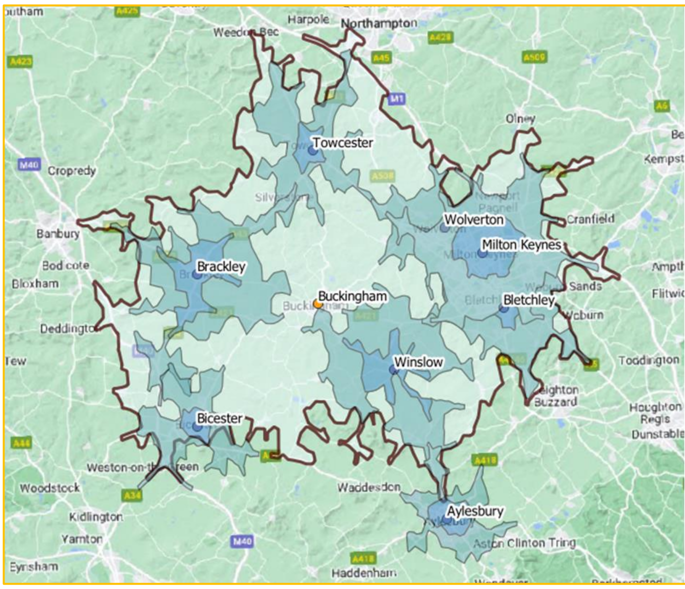
Buckingham Competing Towns by Drive-Time



To...	Drive-time (Min	Distance (Km)
Winslow	13	10.7
Brackley	15	12.6
Wolverton	17	16.7
Milton Keynes	19	22.6
Towcester	20	18.0
Bletchley	21	21.0
Bicester	23	18.4
Aylesbury	30	27.2

Distance and travel time by car to the local towns and villages have been calculated (into the centre of the towns).

Buckingham Competing Towns and their Drive-Times



The Map shows the 5 and 10 Minute drive-times around Buckingham's' competing towns, and also 25 minute drive-time isochrones around Buckingham.

There are overlaps of areas within these 10 minutes drivetime catchments between Buckingham and the towns of : Winslow, Brackley and a very small slight overlap with Towcester, Wolverton and Milton Keynes.

Analysis of Buckingham's competing towns by drive-time, shows that besides Milton Keynes, there are 7 towns within a 30-minute drivetime. Isochrone representations of these competing towns and their drive-times shows overlaps within 10-minute drive-times for four of these towns as well as Milton Keynes.

Evidence: The Survey Process

Undertaking Town Centre Assets and Stakeholder Surveys

To help objectively understand Buckingham town centre, the People & Places Partnership has adapted its town centre assets and stakeholder survey process that forms part of the LGA toolkit.

This tried and tested, nationally-used survey process enables the monitoring and analysis of town centre performance and key stakeholder perceptions. The purpose of the monitoring process is to collect standardised key performance indicators (KPIs) to help local organisations and businesses to better understand the function, trends and issues facing the town centre and its potential relative to similar towns elsewhere. Key components of the Buckingham town centre baseline survey will be a town centre customer and business surveys.

Evidence from such detailed surveys will help support a reasoned, evidence-based discussion of key stakeholders' priorities and facilitate involvement in preparing and delivering a Buckingham Town Centre 'forward framework' of initial recommendations. The approach will help in strengthening the collective understanding of the role of the town centre as a retail destination and local community hub. This survey of town centre assets and stakeholder perceptions has four elements:

a. *The Mix of Businesses & Services*

To help understand the scale and variety of businesses and services in a town centre, data made available by Buckingham Town Council about the mix of town centre businesses and services in 2019 and 2023 has been assessed. This offers the opportunity to gain insights during a period when already significant trends to maintain the critical mass of Buckingham's town centre mix of businesses and services.

b. *Town Centre Access and Visual Assessment*

As part of a town centre visit, an initial audit was undertaken of town centre arrival points, access routes, along with an initial assessment of the visual quality of key locations. This information will be helpful in determining the vitality of Buckingham and the way customers access and move around the different parts of the town centre.

c. *Town Centre Business Confidence Survey*

A business survey was sent digitally to all town centre businesses with the Town Council and Buckinghamshire Council. The short survey helps to gauge businesses' perceptions of trading in the town centre and gives a sense of their collective future priorities for helping to boost its economic performance.

d. *Town Centre Customer Survey*

People & Places has worked with the Town Council and Neighbourhood Planning group, to agree a town centre customer survey that complements and adds to research already undertaken about residents' perceptions of the town centre. Distinct from the previous study, this approach does not rely on an understanding of customers' use of the town centre gathered indirectly from businesses.

The Place: The Mix of Businesses & Services

Business and Services Use Class

It is important to understand the scale and variety of businesses and services in a town centre. A variety of shops and a wide range of services in a town are important to its ability to remain competitive and continue to attract customers. Sustaining a balance between the different aspects of retail and services ensures that the local population and visitors can spend time and money there, keeping the generated wealth within the local economy. Importantly, it provides local employment and helps to retain local spend rather than lose it to nearby towns or retail parks.

Data made available by Buckingham Town Council about the mix of town centre businesses and services in 2019 and 2023 offers the opportunity to gain insights during a period when already significant trends were heightened by the pandemic and greater flexibility in the way the mix could be curated through the planning system. It is key to understand these trends as a pointer to the incentives and controls that can and should be employed to maintain the critical mass of Buckingham's town centre mix of businesses and services.

Simplified use classes from Summer 2021

The types of businesses and services are classified and controlled to a degree by the planning system through use class designations. The ways the business uses were classified and controlled was simplified in September 2020. New regulations created a streamlined new use class system that came into operation in July 2021.

The implications for a town like Buckingham are that the greater flexibility enables, for example, premises previously occupied a shop to be readily converted to a restaurant. This can help reduce the number of empty units and increase town centre vitality. It can in extremes lead to an imbalance in the mix of businesses and services. The change in use class definitions also makes comparison between current and former business mix data more complicated.

The new use classes are: a broad Class E (commercial, business and service), Class F1 (learning and non-residential institutions) and Class F2 (local community). Shops fall into Class E or Class F2 depending on their use, size and location. This change is important in shaping the potential mix of town centre businesses because it is no longer necessary to obtain planning permission for some changes between various non-residential uses required under the previous use classes.

Full details of the changes, including the full list of the new use classes and their previous equivalents, are provided in People & Places downloadable guide to changing the town centre business mix.

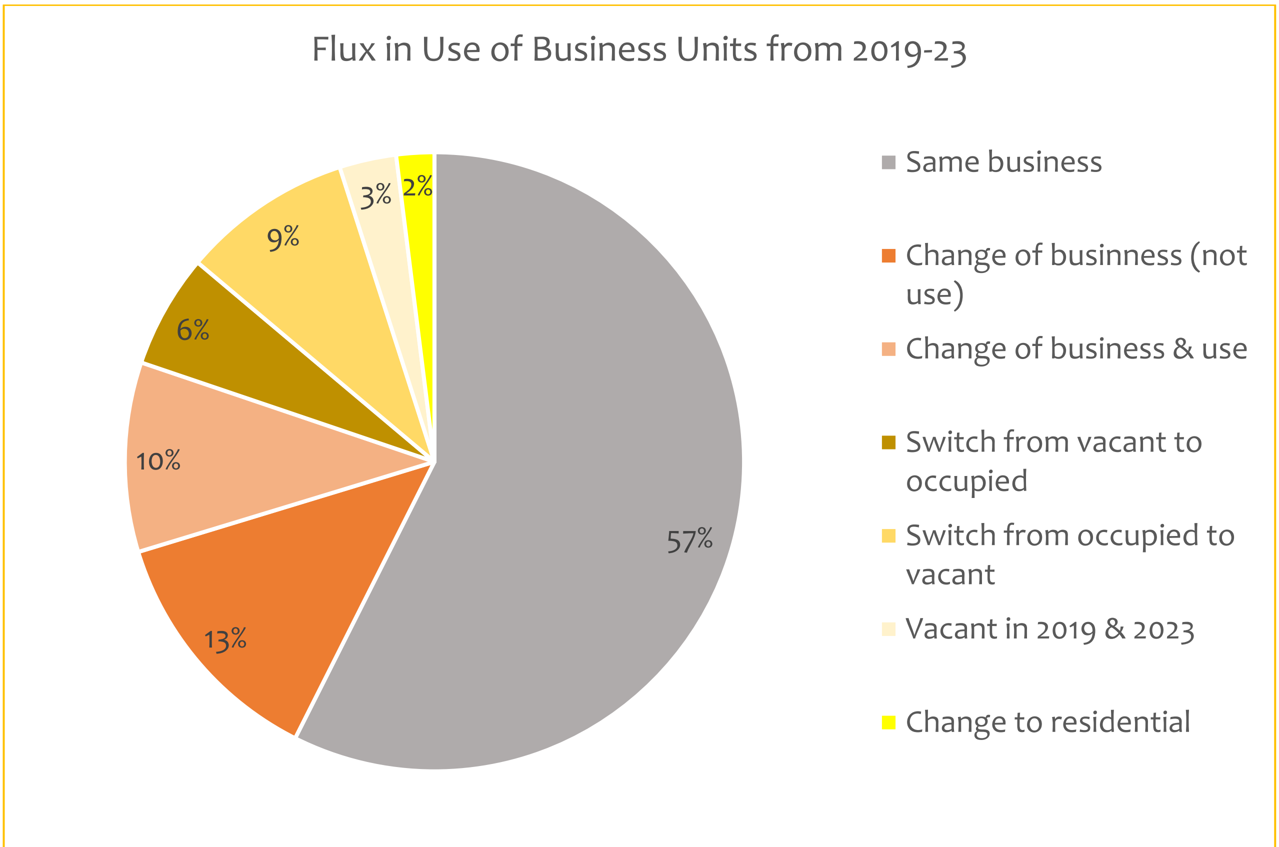
Permitted development

In addition to the changes allowed within the broader use class definitions, some changes between use classes are covered by 'permitted development' rights (meaning that planning permission is deemed to have been given). This includes new rules allowing commercial premises to be converted into homes that came into force in March 2021.

A change from business premises to new homes can be delivered through a simple 'prior approval' process instead of a full planning application, subject to consideration by the local planning authority of specific issues such as the impacts of noise from commercial premises and consideration of the impact of the loss of the ground floor commercial, business and service use (in conservation areas only).

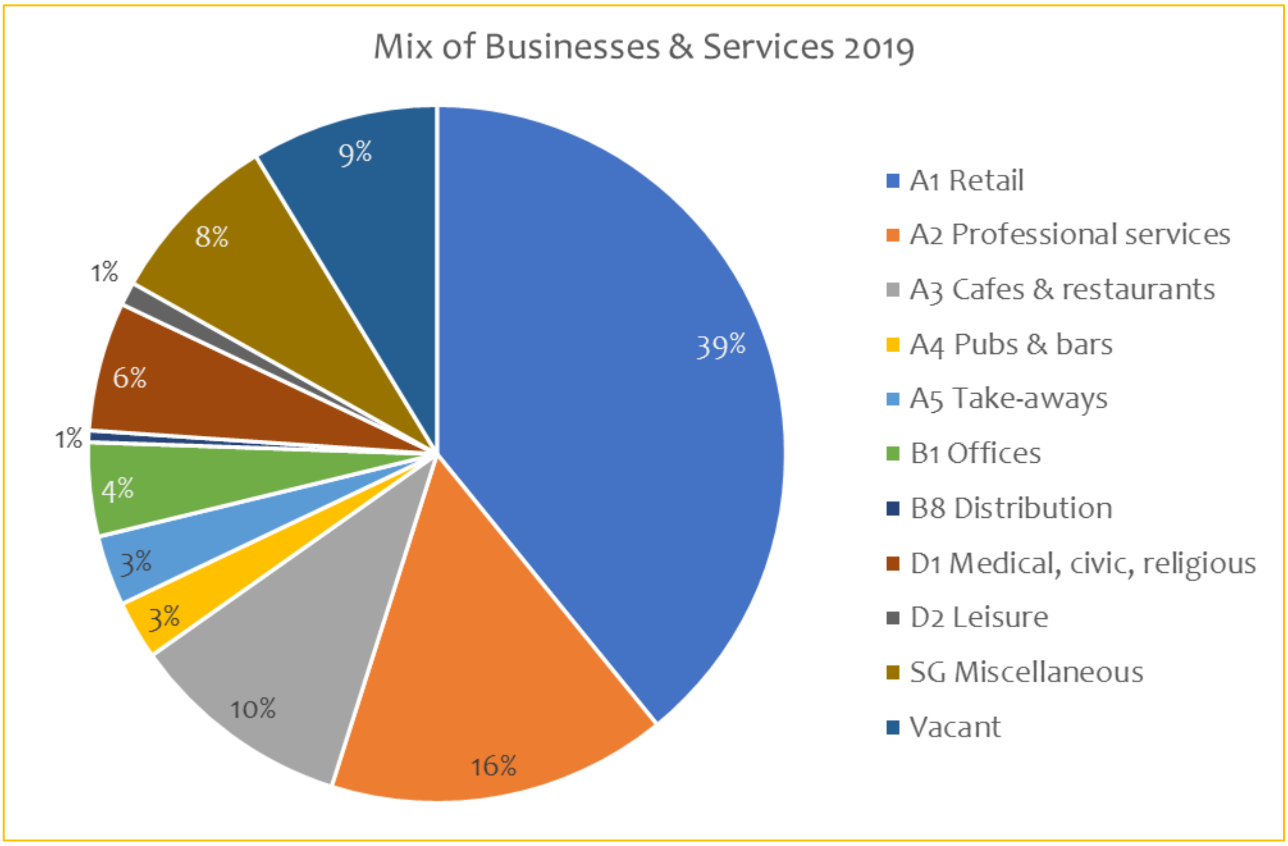
The permitted development right also currently includes a vacancy requirement designed to ensure the building changing use has been vacant for 3 months before the date of the application to protect successful businesses in these premises. A size limit is also be included of 1,500 square metres of floorspace being able to change use under the right.

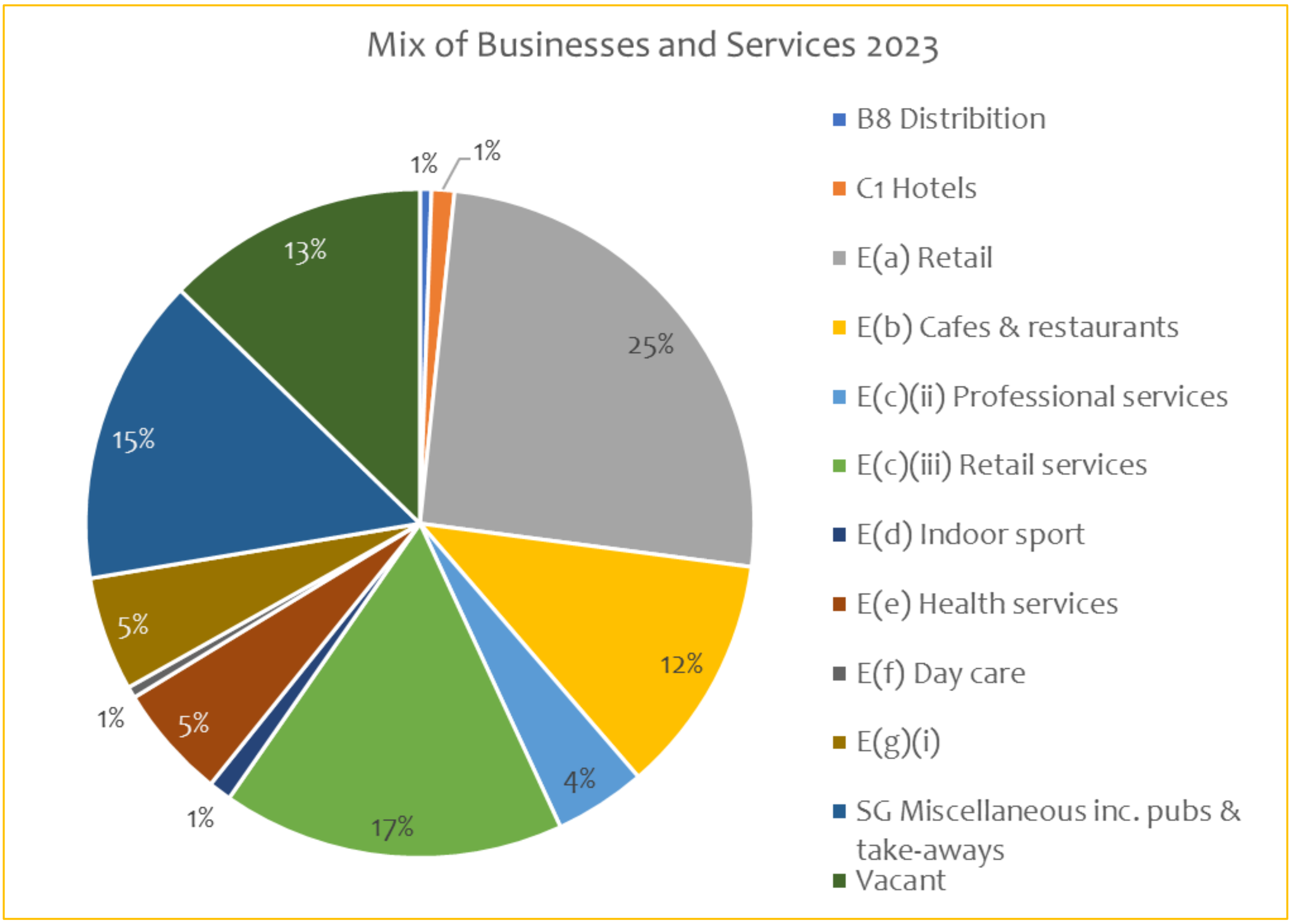
Analysis Changes in Business and Services Mix



The first headline trend to note is that the period between 2019 and 2023 has been a period of significant flux in the use of business premises in Buckingham town centre. As the chart below illustrates, over 40% of business premises in the town have had some form of change in use over this period. This is independent of changes in classification methodology though flags-up a potential instability to be wary of.

Over the period, just under a quarter (23%) of business premises changed in tenant and/or type of business use, including change of business whilst retaining the same use (13%). The changes including a significant (10%) switch in use as designated by the pre-2021 business use classification, including notably the former M&Co premises reopening as the Verdetto Lounge. There was also a flux in vacant units with some empty properties being brought back into use (6%), whilst slightly more other premises became vacant over the period. A small proportion (3%) were empty in both 2019 and 2023.


Mix of Businesses & Services 2019
39%
16%
10%
3%
3%
4%
1%
6%
1%
8%
9%
A1 Retail
A2 Professional services
A3 Cafes & restaurants
A4 Pubs & bars
A5 Take-aways
B1 Offices
B8 Distribution
D1 Medical, civic, religious
D2 Leisure
SG Miscellaneous
Vacant


Mix of Businesses and Services 2023
1%
1%
25%
12%
4%
17%
1%
5%
1%
5%
15%
13%
B8 Distribition
C1 Hotels
E(a) Retail
E(b) Cafes & restaurants
E(c)(ii) Professional services
E(c)(iii) Retail services
E(d) Indoor sport
E(e) Health services
E(f) Day care
E(g)(i)
SG Miscellaneous inc. pubs & take-aways
Vacant

Although the change in the use class category definitions makes it difficult to make direct comparisons between the Buckingham data for 2019 and 2023, it is helpful to consider what is revealed separately about trends.

Use Class 2019	National Benchmark for Small Towns (%)	Buckingham (%)
A1 Retail	42%	39%
A2 Professional services	9%	16%
A3 Cafes & restaurants	9%	10%
A4 Pubs & bars	4%	3%
A5 Take-aways	4%	3%
B1 Offices	2%	4%
B8 Distribution	0%	1%
D1 Medical, civic, religious	8%	6%
D2 Leisure	1%	1%
SG Miscellaneous	9%	8%
Vacant	9%	9%

Comparing the 2019 main categories of use with national benchmarks complied by People & Places reveals that the overall mix of businesses in Buckingham was broadly typical of similar small towns. There was a slightly smaller proportion of retail in Buckingham (39%) compared to national benchmarks (45%), though a slightly larger percentage of financial and professional services (16%) compared to that might be typically expected (9%).

Looking at the proportion of properties occupied by different use classes in 2023, the key point to note is that nearly three-quarters (71%) of town centre premises are now occupied by businesses within use class E. The significance of this is that the owners of these properties do not have to get planning permission to change the use of their building. That is as long as there are no planning conditions directly mentioning the use class and there are not any external structural changes that you would need consent.

The flexibility to change the use of premises classified with use class E can have a positive impact in making re-lettings easier to achieve. It can also enable the mix of different businesses to be skewed, for example, a town popular with visitors is more likely to become dominated by cafes and restaurants.

Another point to note is the change of use of three properties from business to domestic use. This may be due to the special circumstances of the buildings involved, though again is a trend to monitor.

The Place: Town Centre Access and Movement

Improving access to and around the town centre is an important part of maintaining viability and vibrancy. This involves considering different modes of transport, routes and 'gateways' into town centre as well as the ease of access around the town centre for both the familiar resident and unfamiliar visitor.

Active travel potential

The earlier review of the status of the Buckingham Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan -Lite (LCWIP-lite) indicates that now is an opportune time to consider boosting the active travel potential of access into the town centre. Ahead of reviewing the findings of the town centre customers' survey, this section considers what might be the potential for increasing active travel in Buckingham by drawing partly on national research and benchmarks.

Active travel trends and potential for Buckingham can be benchmarked against the UK and Ireland Walking and Cycling Index recently published by Sustrans. The term 'wheeling' is used alongside walking to ensure that wheelchair and mobility scooter users are included.

Key benchmarks about the potential for walking and wheeling are:

- more people walk or wheel five or more days a week than any other mode of travel (49%).
- the most popular purpose for walking is to reach a particular destination, e.g. work, shopping (51%); followed by enjoyment or fitness (42%).
- the most popular change to encourage residents to walk more is to create nicer places along streets to rest (78%). This followed by better pavement accessibility such as level surfaces and dropped kerbs (74%).

Important benchmarks about the potential for cycling include:

- only 15% of people cycle regularly (at least once per week).
- the most popular purpose for cycling is work (34%), shopping, personal business and social trips (33%); and leisure (17%).
- 10% of residents perceive themselves as cycling regularly; 18% occasionally; 5% new or returning to cycling; with 28% saying they do not cycle but would like to.
- the most popular personal improvement to encourage cycling was jointly access to secure cycle storage at or near home and access to a bike (53%); followed by access or improvements to a city cycle sharing scheme (47%).
- the most popular infrastructure investment for encouraging more cycling was more traffic-free cycle routes away from roads, e.g. through parks or along waterways (67%); followed by better links with public transport, like secure cycle parking.

Accessibility within Buckingham town centre

A previous access and signage audit of Buckingham town centre undertaken by People & Places revealed that a key issue for the unfamiliar visitor is awareness and orientation to and around the west end of the town centre between West and Wells Streets. The customer survey helps provide additional information about accessibility issues particular to residents.

The People: Business Confidence Survey

The business confidence survey is an important part of engaging local businesses by understanding their perceptions and priorities. It is a first step in working with them and local businesses groups to help develop solutions.

Characteristics of businesses surveyed

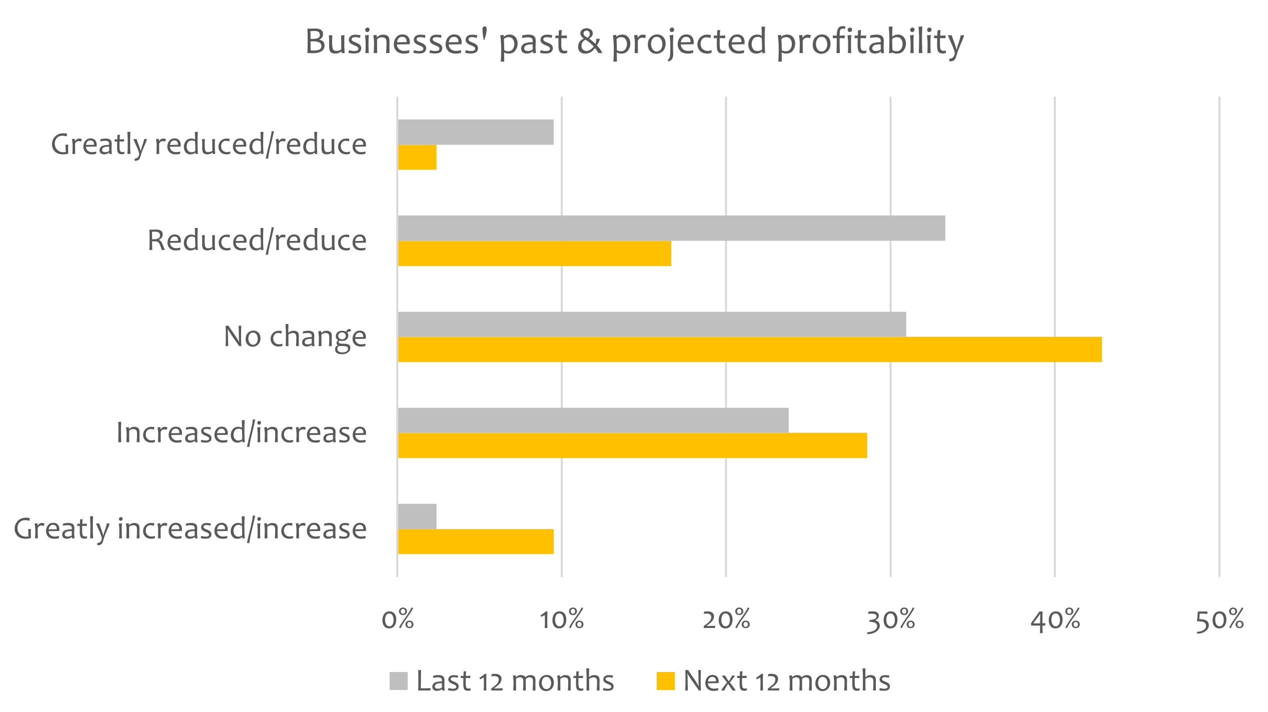
Survey forms were electronically distributed to all the town centre businesses in Buckingham. Town centre businesses were asked to complete the full survey whilst other Buckingham businesses were routed through a shorter version of the survey. There were 76 surveys completed in total, of which 52 were based in the town centre. Based on 158 active town centre businesses shown in Town Council's 2023 business use survey, this equates to a return rate of 33% compared to 25% nationally and suggests an elevated level of interest within the town's business community. It is also indicative of a high percentage of independent retailers that are often owner-managed and more engaged in partnership working.

Nature of business	Buckingham business types surveyed (%)
What type of business or organisation are you?	
Shop	27%
Retail service	23%
Professional/financial services	10%
Hospitality	17%
Leisure	4%
Office	4%
Medical (incl. eye treatment and dentists)	13%
Other	2%
What type of ownership does the business have?	
National multiple business	11%
Regional multiple business	4%
Independent business or organisation	85%
How long has your business been in the town?	
Less than a year	6%
One to five years	25%
Six to ten years	10%
More than ten years	58%

Of the businesses that responded to the survey, 50% were shops of some kind, or providers of retail services and 17% were hospitality businesses; this is broadly representative of the town centre's business mix. 85% of these respondents were independent businesses and this is also broadly representative. A total of 68% of these businesses are long-established in

Buckingham, having been based there for at least six years. This compares to 59% of businesses in benchmarked towns nationally.

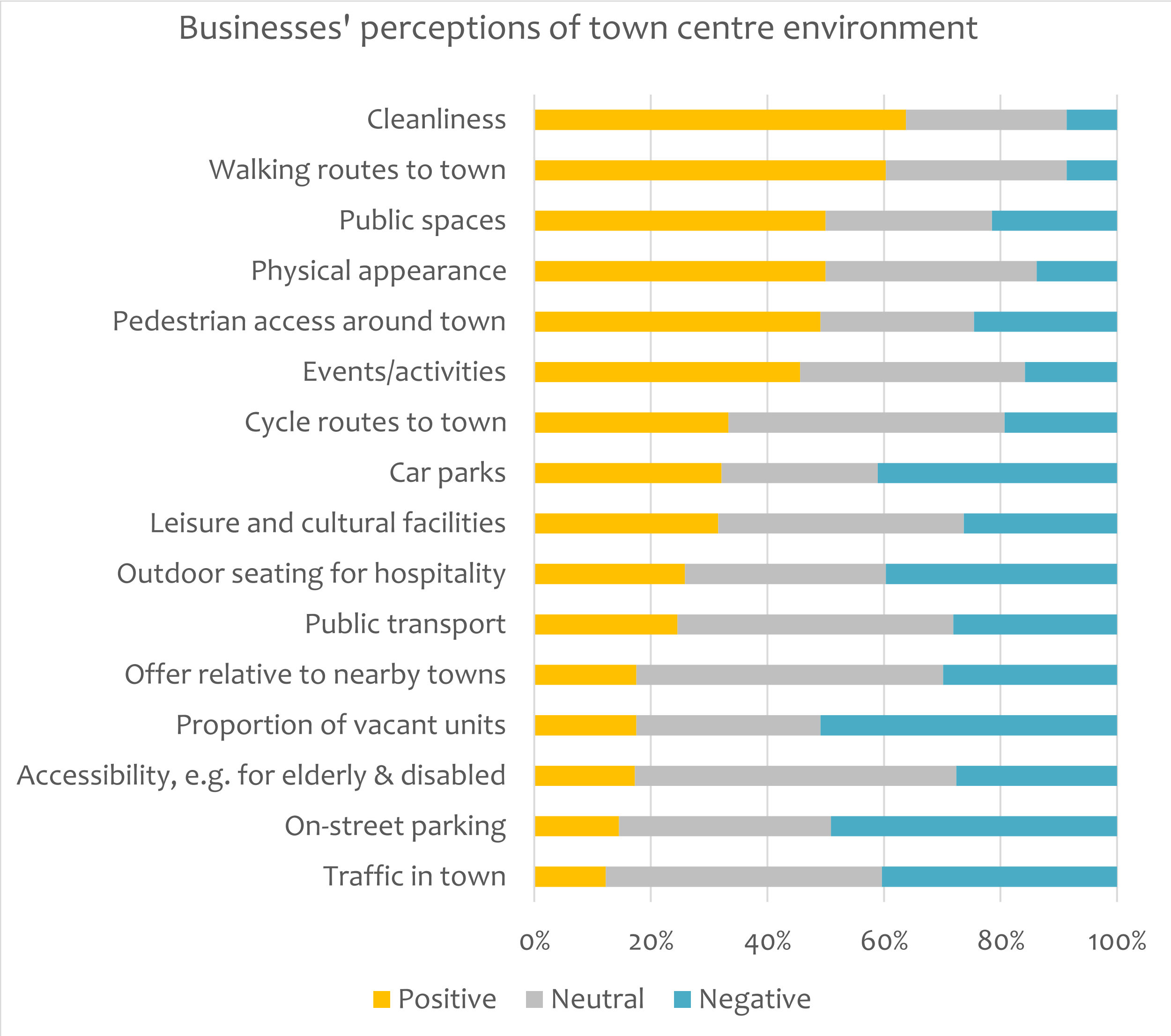
When town centre businesses were asked about their profitability over the last 12 months and their expected future profitability over the next 12 months, there was a variety of responses. A total of 43% of businesses reported that their profitability was reduced or greatly reduced over the 12 months to summer 2023. Optimism amongst businesses is nearly always greater looking forward, and the percentage projecting a decline in profitability is reduced to 19% . This does though indicate that nearly 1 in 5 town centre businesses are vulnerable to closure. In contrast, over a third of businesses (39%) are expecting profits to increase or greatly increase over the next 12 months, whilst 42% expect no change.



Businesses' perceptions of the town centre

When Buckingham businesses were asked about their perceptions of the town centre, the following factors were rated positively by at least half of businesses:

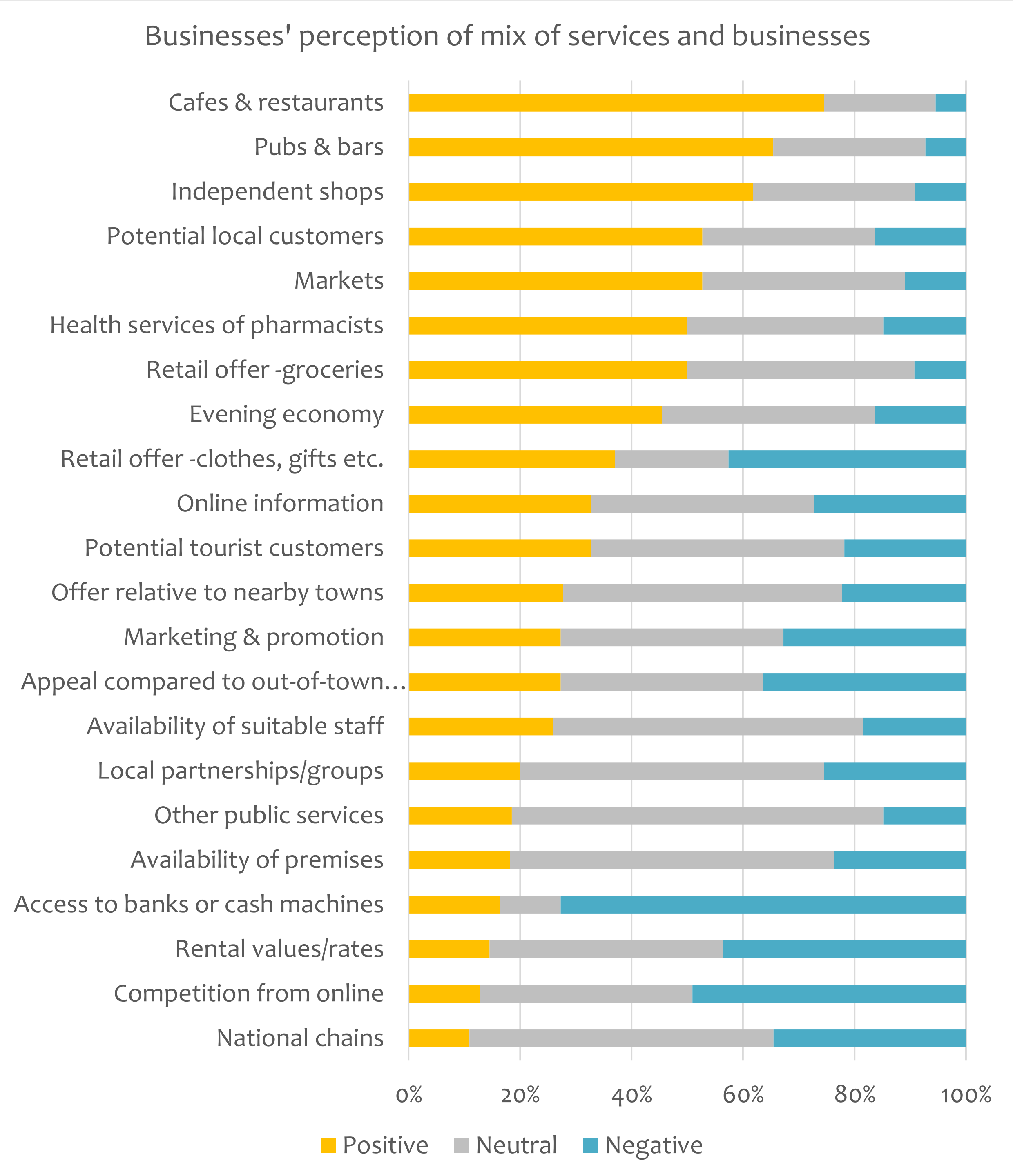
- Cafes & restaurants (75%)
- Pubs & bars (65%)
- Cleanliness (64%)
- Independent shops (62%)
- Walking routes to town (60%)
- Potential local customers (53%)
- Markets (53%)
- Retail offer -groceries (50%)
- Health services or pharmacists (50%)
- Physical appearance (50%)
- Public spaces (50%)



Fewer businesses held negative perceptions, though over a third of those surveyed had concerns about the following aspects of the town centre environment and its mix of businesses and services:

- Access to banking (73%)
- Proportion of vacant units (51%)
- On-street parking (49%)
- Retail offer -clothes, gifts etc. (43%)
- Car parks (41%)
- Outdoor seating for hospitality (40%)
- Traffic in town (40%)
- Appeal compared to out-of-town shopping (35%)
- National chains (35%)
- Town marketing & promotion (33%)

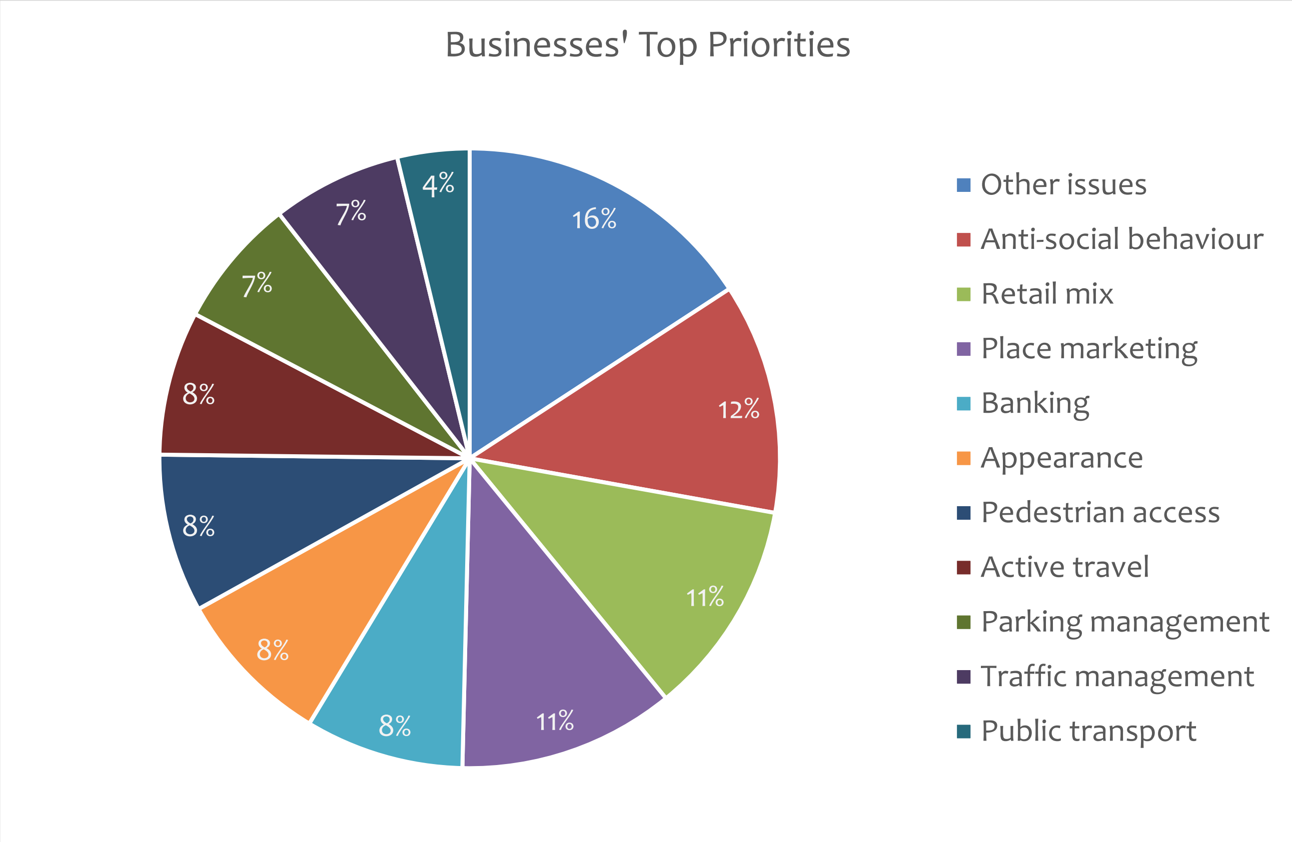
Going forward it is important to understand perceptions of businesses alongside those of town centre users in ways that accentuate the positive and address the negative. Stakeholders' views of future priorities will also inform such forward planning.



Business priorities for improving the town centre

Businesses were also prompted to share their top two priorities for improving Buckingham town centre around five themes relating to the guidance in the LGA Toolkit. The table overleaf summarises the categorisation of proposed priorities by theme.

Priorities	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Travel to town		
Active travel	10	8%
Parking management	9	7%
Traffic management	9	7%
Public transport	5	4%
Free parking	3	2%
	36	27%
Mix of Businesses and Services		
Retail mix	15	11%
Banking	11	8%
Hospitality	4	3%
Property costs	2	2%
Public services	1	1%
	33	25%
Streetscape and Appearance		
Appearance	11	8%
Pedestrian access	11	8%
Cleanliness	2	2%
Public spaces	1	1%
Amenities	1	1%
	26	20%
Marketing and Events		
Place marketing	15	11%
Specialist markets and events	3	2%
Leisure	2	2%
	20	15%
Social Issues and Leadership		
Anti-social behaviour	16	12%
Planning	1	1%
Cost of living	1	1%
	18	14%
TOTALS	**133**	**100%**



The broad themes of travel to town (27%), mix of businesses and services (25%) and streetscape and appearance (20%), accounted for three-quarters of priorities expressed by businesses.

As the pie chart above summarises, within the broad themes, certain issues were identified as important priorities by a significant number of businesses, including anti-social behaviour (12%), the imbalance of the town centre retail mix (11%), the need for enhanced marketing (11%), pedestrian access (8%), active travel (8%) and parking management (8%). It is important to recognise the priority given to such softer issues that might not normally be picked-up by the statutory or neighbourhood planning processes.

The People: Town Centre User's Survey

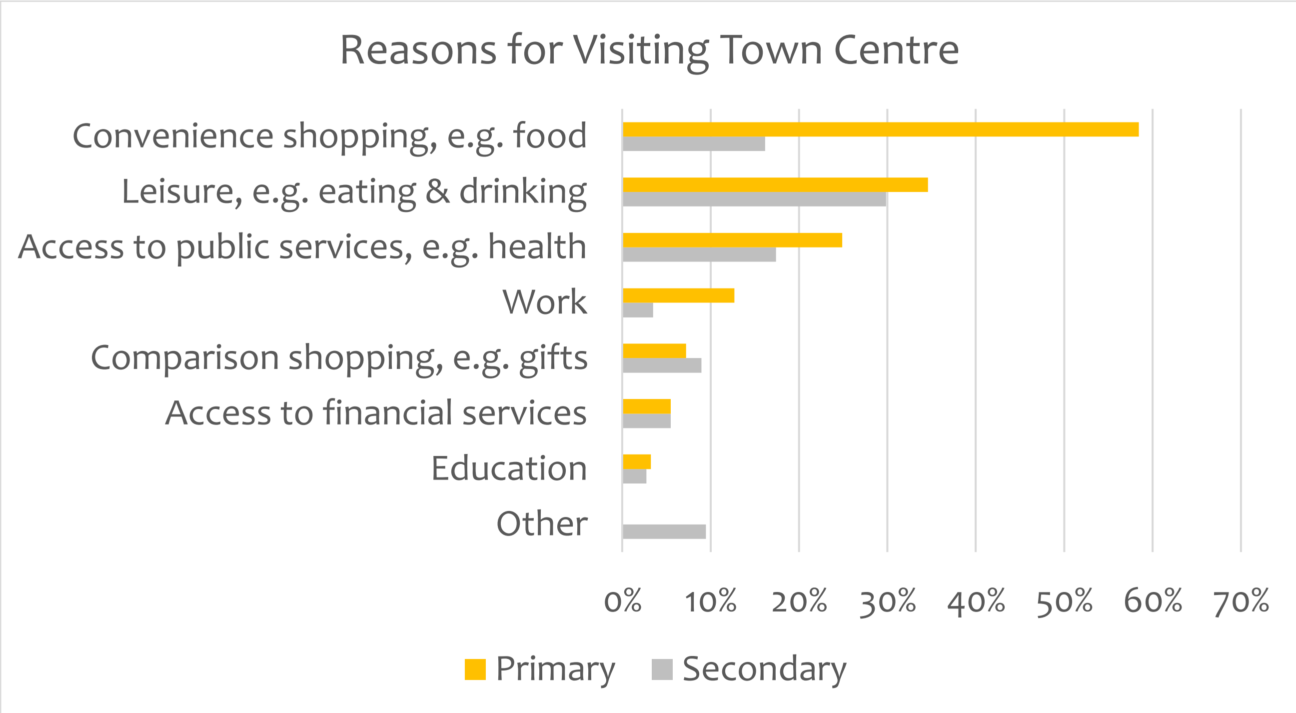
The aim of the town centre users' survey is to establish how the town centre is perceived and used by residents primarily. It provides a wealth of data from a range of different types of local -and some visiting- town centre users.

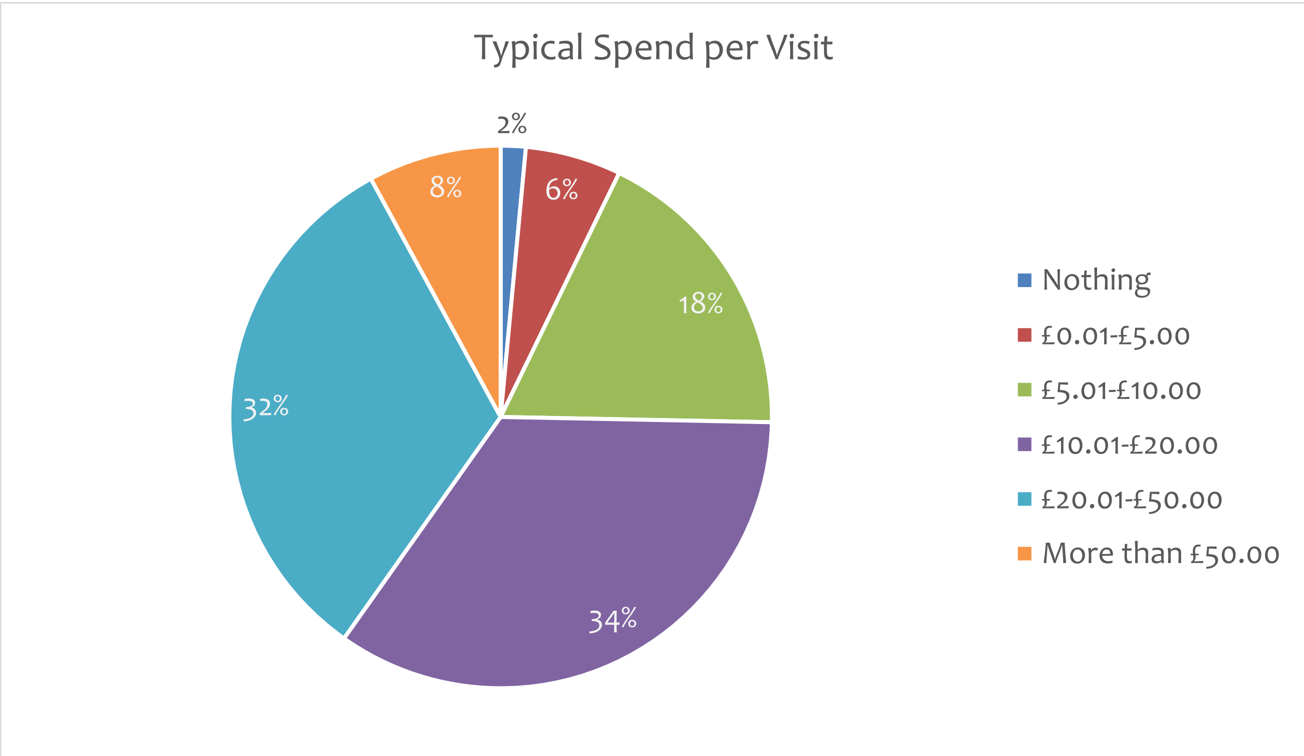
Characteristics of customers surveyed

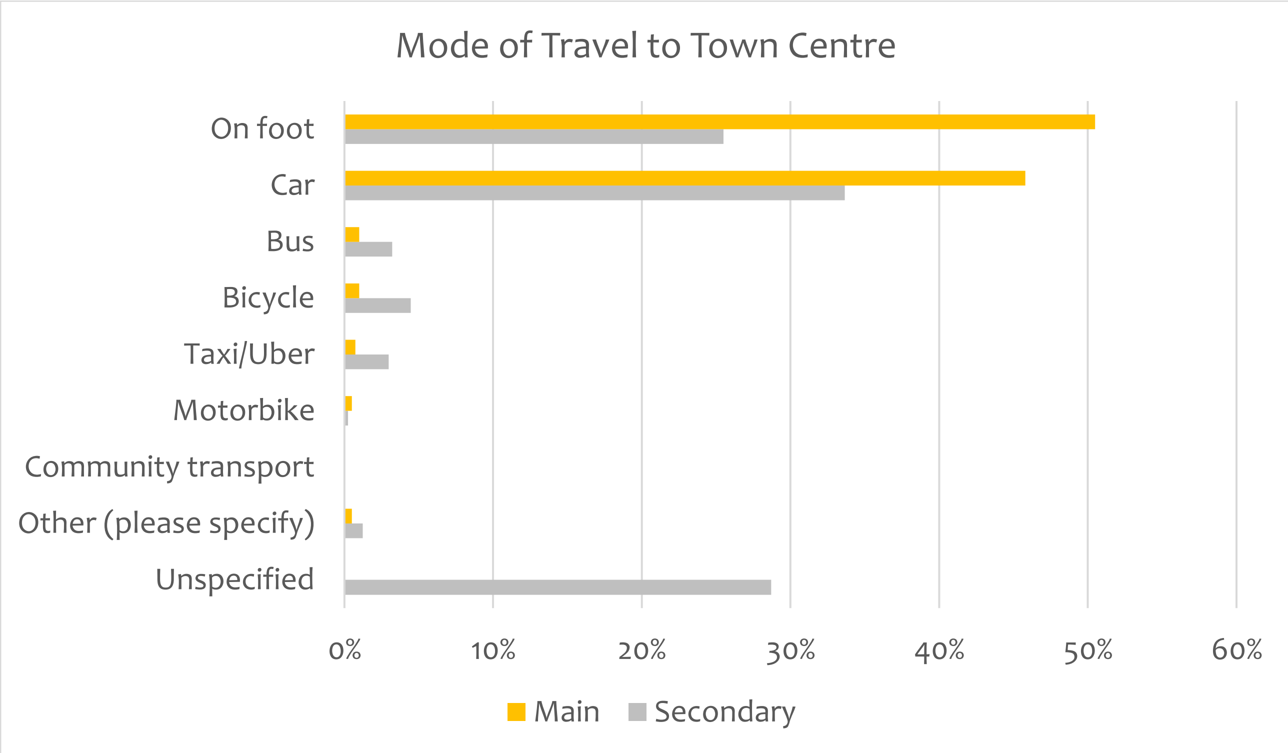
A sample of 407 Buckingham town centre users were surveyed online through social media using the help of local community partners. Over two-thirds (68.5%) of respondents were female, a comparable proportion to surveys conducted in towns nationally.

	Buckingham (number)	Buckingham %
Is Buckingham the town centre that you visit most frequently?		
Yes	379	93%
No	28	7%
Milton Keynes	75%	246
Bicester	30%	100
Aylesbury	11%	35
Towcester	3%	11
Other (please specify)	23%	76

Customer background and nature of visit to town centre	National Small Towns %	Buckingham (number)	Buckingham %
Gender			
Male	35%	109	31.5%
Female	65%	237	68.5%
Age			
16-25	6%	11	3%
26-35	13%	41	12%
36-45	21%	75	22%
46-55	21%	82	24%
56-65	18%	66	19%
66-75	20%	49	14%
Over 75	-	24	7%


Reasons for Visiting Town Centre
Convenience shopping, e.g. food
Leisure, e.g. eating & drinking
Access to public services, e.g. health
Work
Comparison shopping, e.g. gifts
Access to financial services
Education
Other
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
Primary
Secondary


Typical Spend per Visit
2%
6%
18%
34%
32%
8%
Nothing
£0.01-£5.00
£5.01-£10.00
£10.01-£20.00
£20.01-£50.00
More than £50.00



As the charts on these pages show, the customer survey gathered a wealth of information about who completed the survey and their habits in using the town centre. It shows, for example, that grocery shopping is by far the most popular primary reason (58%) for coming to Buckingham town centre. Not surprisingly this illustrates the importance of the town centre Waitrose to wider footfall.

Leisure uses such as using hospitality businesses, account for more than a further third of people's reasons for visiting the town centre. Taken together with grocery shopping, these two reasons probably account for why 40% of customers spend up to and over £50 on each visit.

In contrast, comparison shopping for items such as fashion, gifts or electrical goods is only a primary reason for visiting the town centre for 7% of users, despite it accounting for three quarters of retail businesses.

The data shows us that over half of town centre users surveyed (55%), come into the town centre more than once a week though two thirds (66%) dwell for less than an hour. Compared to what we might expect for a town of its size, only a small per centage of users (12%) extend their dwell time in Buckingham to one to two hours.

The data indicates that typically the residents surveyed come to town on foot as their primary (50%) or secondary (25%) travel mode. Comparable numbers travel to town by car as their primary (46%) or secondary (34%) mode of transport . Only 1% of town centre users travel by bike or public travel as their primary mode of transport though this increases to 4% and 3% respectively as secondary options.

Frequency and duration of visits to town centre	National Small Towns %	Buckingham (number)	Buckingham %
How often do you currently visit Buckingham town centre? (Please choose one option only)			
Daily	21%	73	18%
More than once a week	39%	151	37%
Weekly	19%	104	26%
More than once a month	10%	55	14%
Once a month or less	8%	16	4%
Infrequently	21%	7	2%
How long do you currently stay during a visit to the town centre?			
<1 hour	44%	264	66%
1-2 hours	35%	47	12%
2-4 hours	13%	56	14%
4-6 hours	3%	4	1%
All day	5%	17	4%

Customers' perceptions of the town centre

When Buckingham town centre users were asked about their perceptions of the town centre, the following factors were rated positively by at least half of residents surveyed:

- Convenience (81%)
- Cafes/restaurants (74%)
- Walking routes to town (72%)
- Customer service (65%)
- Retail offer –groceries (62%)
- Physical appearance (62%)
- Cleanliness (61%)
- Markets (59%)
- Public spaces (55%)
- Independent shops (55%)
- Health services (54%)
- Pubs/ bars (53%)
- Pedestrian access (50%)

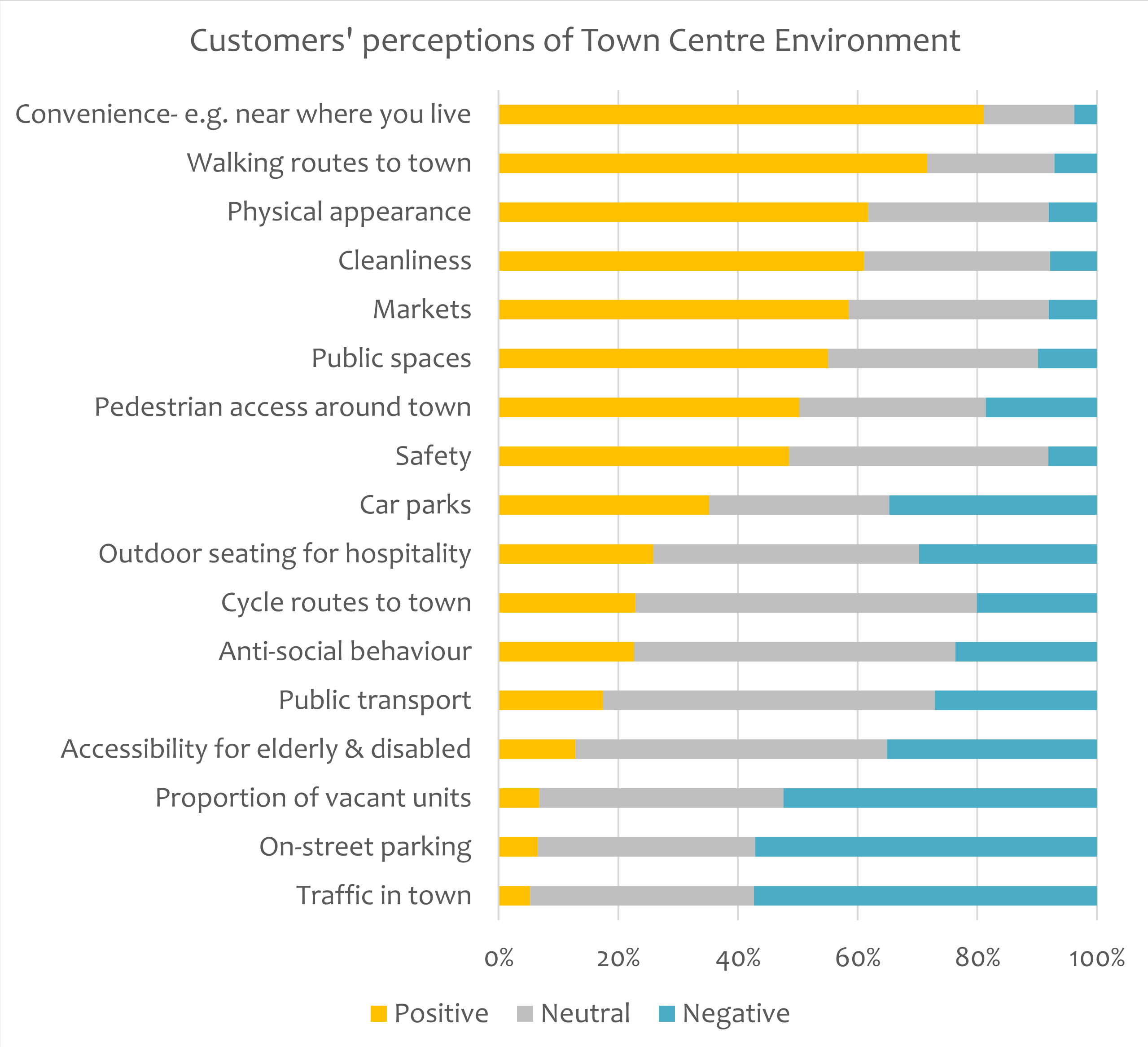
Fewer customers held negative perceptions, though 30% of those surveyed had concerns about the following aspects of the town centre environment and its mix of businesses and services:

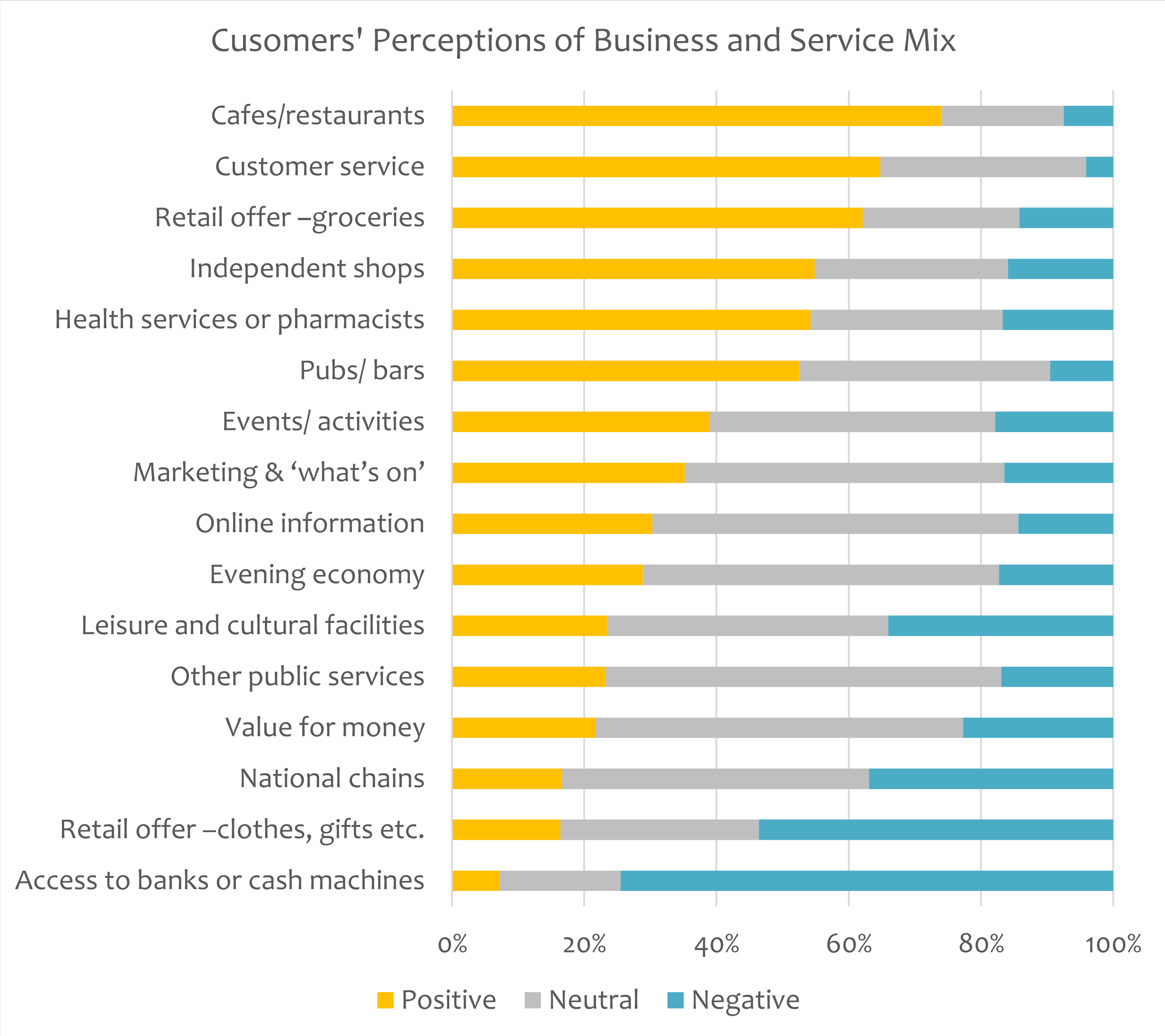
- Access to banking (74%)
- Traffic in town (57%)
- On-street parking (57%)

- Retail offer –fashion etc. (54%)
- Proportion of vacant units (52%)
- National chains (37%)
- Accessibility for elderly & disabled (35%)
- Car parks (35%)
- Leisure and cultural facilities (34%)
- Outdoor seating (30%)

As with businesses' perception, going forward it is important to understand perceptions of both sets of stakeholders alongside each other in ways that accentuate the positive and address the negative. Stakeholders' views of future priorities will also inform such forward planning.

Customers' perceptions of the town centre





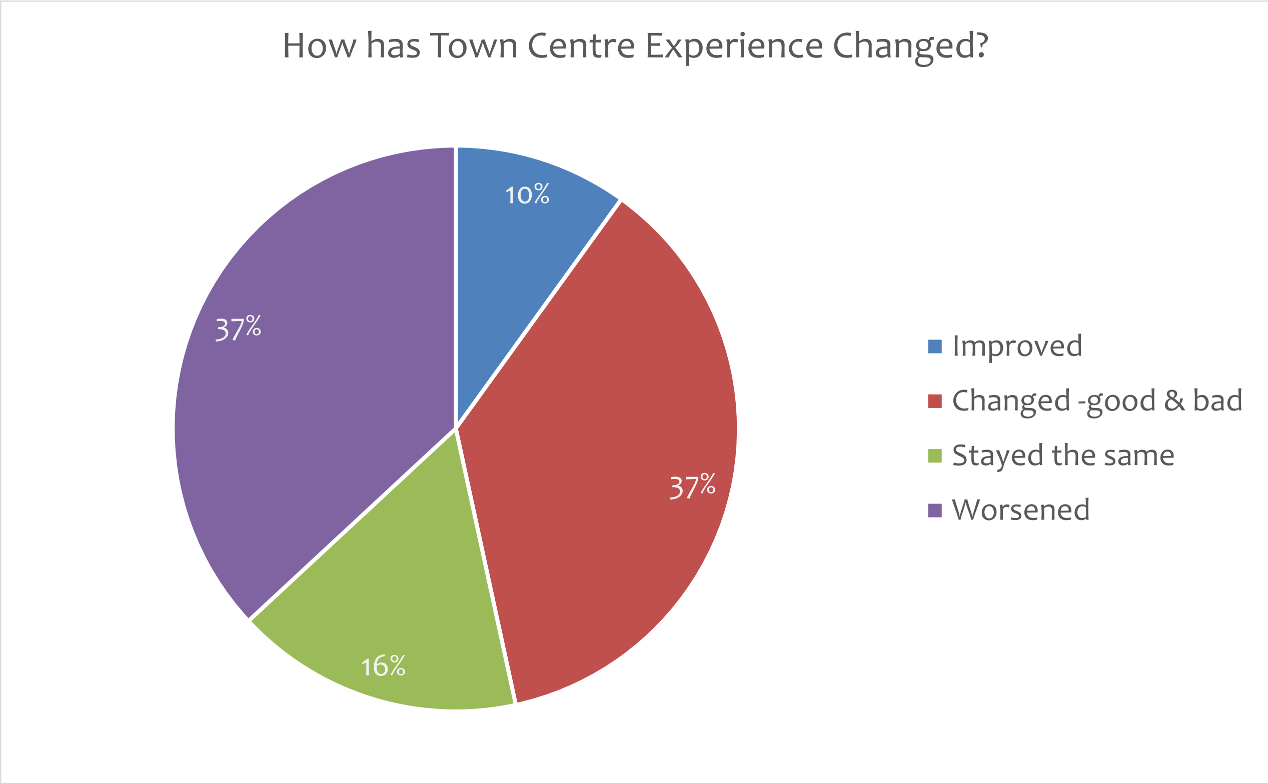
Customers were also asked about their overall impressions of Buckigham town centre and how this had changed over time.

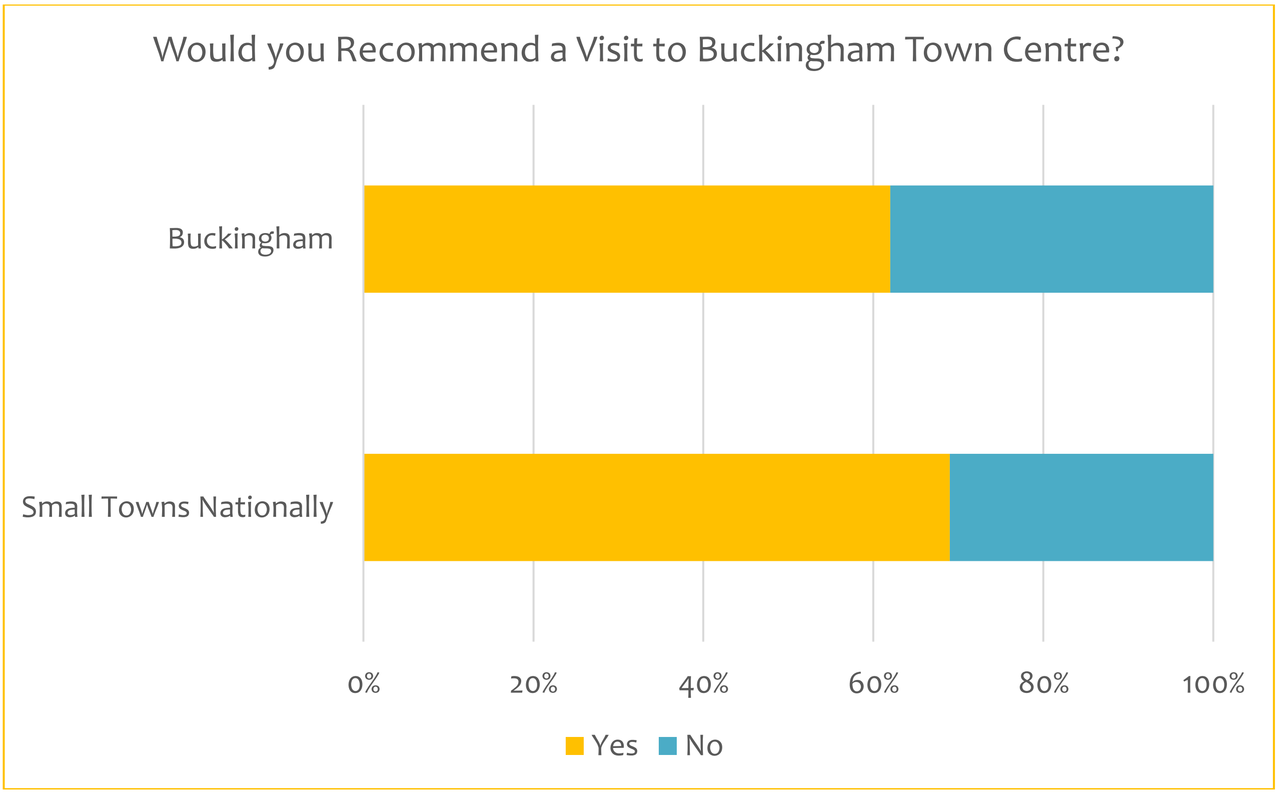
How has your experience of the town centre changed?

When asked how their experience of Buckingham town centre had changed in recent years, over a third (37%) reported that it had worsened. Only 10% of town users said it had improved, with a further 37% reporting that it had changed in a mixture of good and bad ways, and 18% said it had stayed the same.

Would you recommend a visit to the town centre?

When asked if they would recommend a visit to the town centre, nearly two-thirds said 'yes'. This is slightly less that typical of similar towns nationally.


How has Town Centre Experience Changed?
10%
37%
16%
37%
Improved
Changed -good & bad
Stayed the same
Worsened


Would you Recommend a Visit to Buckingham Town Centre?
Buckingham
Small Towns Nationally
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Yes
No

What one word would you use to sum-up the town centre?

The word cloud shown here gives an indication of the most popular words used by town centre users to sum-up Buckingham town centre.

Such a word cloud, whilst only indicative, is useful in understanding how the town centre is perceived by current users who are familiar with it. It gives a visual representation of sentiments and can be helpful in determining how the town can be honestly promoted to potential new users in a way that creates achievable expectations.

Prominent words used to describe Buckingham town centre include a mix of sentiments including positive words such as ‘friendly’, ‘pleasant’, ‘convenient’ and ‘quaint’ to more negative descriptions to ‘tired’, ‘decline’, ‘dull’ and ‘traffic’.

In similar fashion to the indication given by the other questions about the overall impressions, the word cloud could be re-visited to give a good sense of continued progress. The aspiration would be that users’ perceptions are more positive if, when posed again in one to two-years’ time, a higher percentage of respondents report that their experience of the centre had improved in recent years.

Customers’ future priorities

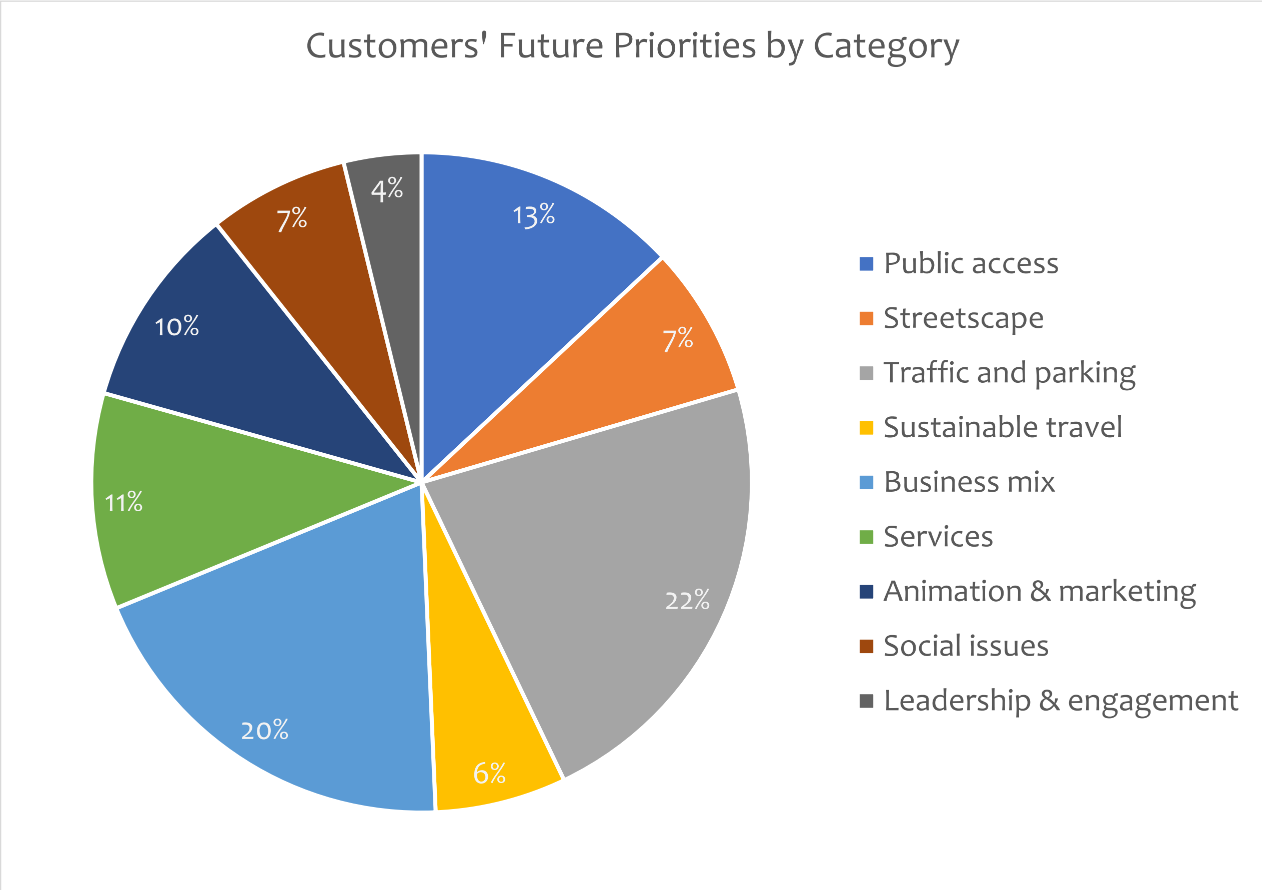
The charts and tables overleaf summarise analysis of over 1,100 comments received when customers were asked to give their top two priorities for the future improvement of Buckingham town centre. The total is more than double the number of respondents because some responses included more than one priority.

Analysis of the responses by the five broad categorises illustrates the breadth of the customers’ priorities and relatively even distribution of responses across these. Drilling-down into the detail of sub-categories, it is possible to make the following distinctions:

Businesses & services

Calls to improve the retail mix in Buckingham town centre is the largest, single sub-category (10%) and frequently included calls for fashion retailers, independent retailers and sometimes for more national multiples. General calls to change the wider business mix (7%) was identified as a separate though related sub-category that frequently included comments about a perceived imbalance in presence of barbers, charity shops and cafes.

In terms of services there was a significant number of calls for improved banking facilities (5%), though this precedes the opening of the Banking Hub in the Market Square. There were also a significant number of responses (2%) relating to health service provision because of both its perceived importance and high demand, as well as calls to improve the market (2%).



Category of Customers' Future Priorities	Number	Percentage
1. Businesses & services		
Business mix	215	19%
Services	117	11%
2. Travel to town		
Traffic and parking	248	22%
Sustainable travel	71	6%
3. Appearance & accessibility		
Public access	144	13%
Streetscape	82	7%
4. Managing change & social issues		
Social issues	76	7%
Leadership & engagement	42	4%
5. Leisure and tourism		
Animation & marketing	110	10%
TOTAL	**1105**	**100%**

Travel to town

Within a variety of issues relating to customers' experiences of travel to town, calls for free parking were the sub-category that received the highest level of responses (9%), as is often typical of responses to such surveys. This was followed by comments covering perceived high levels of traffic in the town centre (7%) that create difficulties for pedestrians and also are a cause of congestion for motorists. With the range of comments about wider parking management (5%), many responses related to the Cornwalls' Meadow Car Park and especially to the unreliability of payment machines in what was often referred to as the "Waitrose" section of the car park.

Calls for improvements to more sustainable modes of transport made-up a significant proportion of the overall responses (6%) including the prioritisation of improvements to public transport provision (3%), cycling infrastructure (2%) and walking routes into town (1%).

Appearance & accessibility

Priority given to improving public access across the town centre (14%) included the prioritisation of better accessibility (5%) through improved conditions for walking, wheeling and road crossings alongside specific calls for pedestrianisation schemes (4%) mostly covering the Market Place and mentions of the need to improve footpath paving (3%).

Calls for a range of streetscape improvements (3%) included cleanliness (2%), built heritage (2%) and the physical appearance of the town centre (1%).

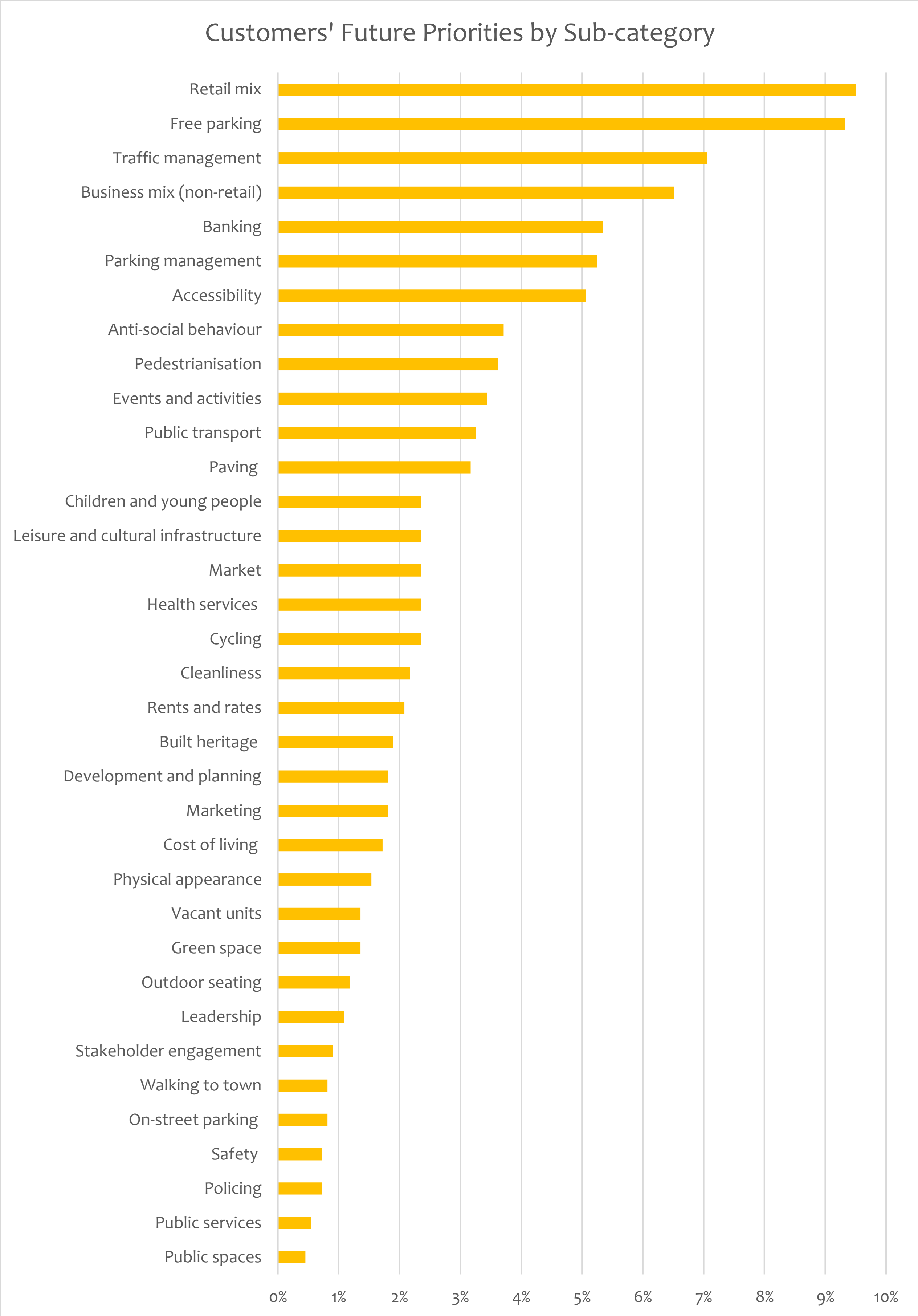
Managing change & social issues

The need to respond to perceived levels of anti-social behaviour including congregation in public spaces, excessive drinking and a desire for an increased police presence, were a significant priority (4%). The need to show awareness of and respond to the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on a section of the local population was a second social issue to receive a significant proportion of responses (2%).

Concerns about the extent of recent development and pressure placed on existing to infrastructure was the main leadership issue (2%) that customers considered needed to be addressed.

Leisure and tourism

Within the broad category of leisure and tourism, there was a an even spread of priorities between a desire to see more town centre events and activities (3%), investing in leisure and cultural facilities (2%), providing activities for children and young people (2%) and improved marketing (2%) of such activities and the wider town.


Customers' Future Priorities by Sub-category
Retail mix
Free parking
Traffic management
Business mix (non-retail)
Banking
Parking management
Accessibility
Anti-social behaviour
Pedestrianisation
Events and activities
Public transport
Paving
Children and young people
Leisure and cultural infrastructure
Market
Health services
Cycling
Cleanliness
Rents and rates
Built heritage
Development and planning
Marketing
Cost of living
Physical appearance
Vacant units
Green space
Outdoor seating
Leadership
Stakeholder engagement
Walking to town
On-street parking
Safety
Policing
Public services
Public spaces
0%
1%
2%
3%
4%
5%
6%
7%
8%
9%
10%

Comparing Business and Customer Perceptions

It is instructive to compare and contrast the different persoectives of town centre businessses and customers. Businesses of course in part take the perspective of how the town centre environment and mix, impacts on their ability to trade that might be specific to the type and location of their business. Different types of customers too will bring their own perspectives based on what theybseek from a town centre. The prompts use in the survey are also im part different and therefore account for some of the differences in the responses.

Looking at the responses from both sets of stakeholders, we should be able to see these contrasting perspectives as well as compatible elements that are key to attracting footfall and encouraging foot-flow around town, increased dwell-times and higher levels of satisfcation.

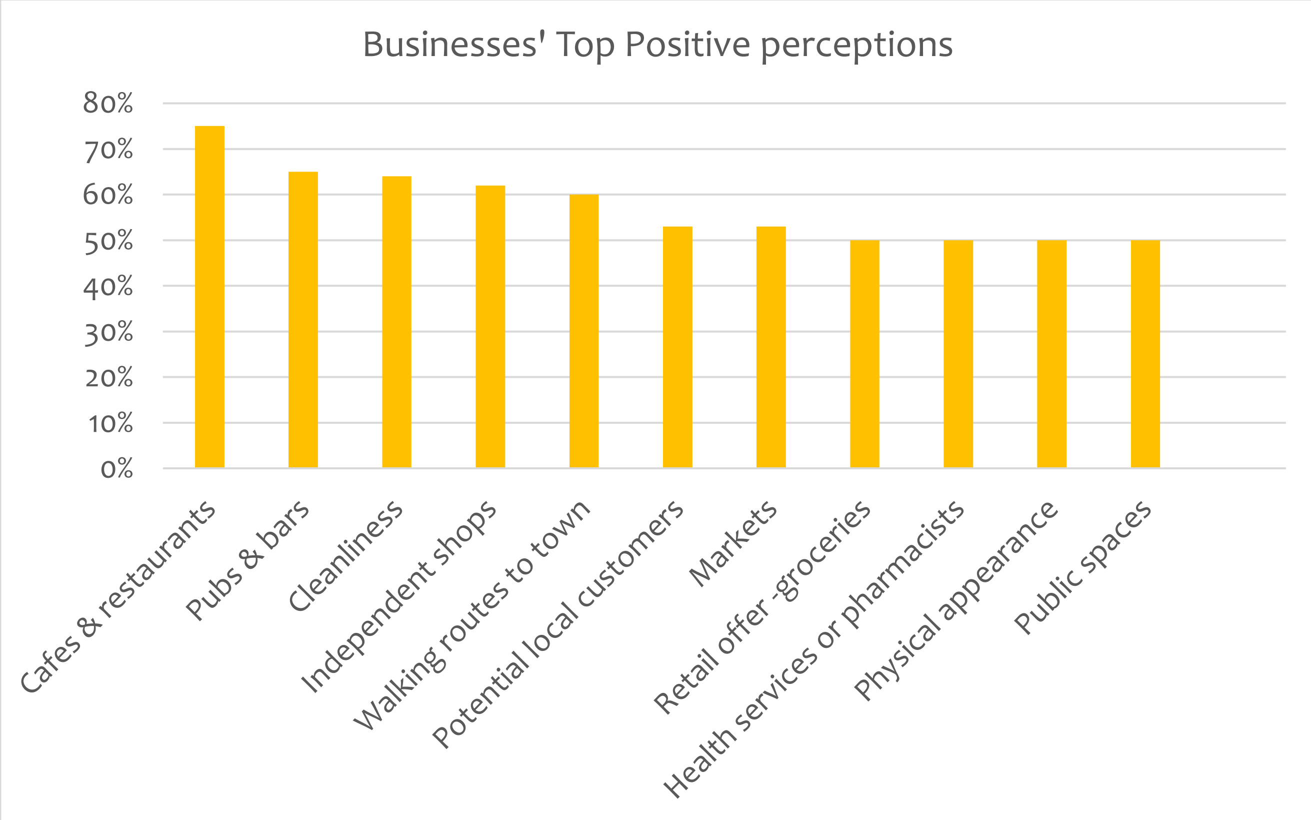
Looking at the top positive and negative perceptions of both businesses and customers for Buckigham town centre, shows remarkable similariities. The list of top positive perceptions for both sets of stakeholders feature cafes and restaurants prominently, and pubs to a slightly lesser extent. Independent shops, grocery retail, markets and access to health services are also all aspects of the mix of businesses and services viewed as making positive contributions to the town centre. Cleanliness, public spaces, physical appearance and the ability to walk to town, are all aspects of environment that feature in both lists of positive features. Issues that do not appear in both listings are the appeal to local customers and customer service /convenience that might be considred as different sides of same coin.

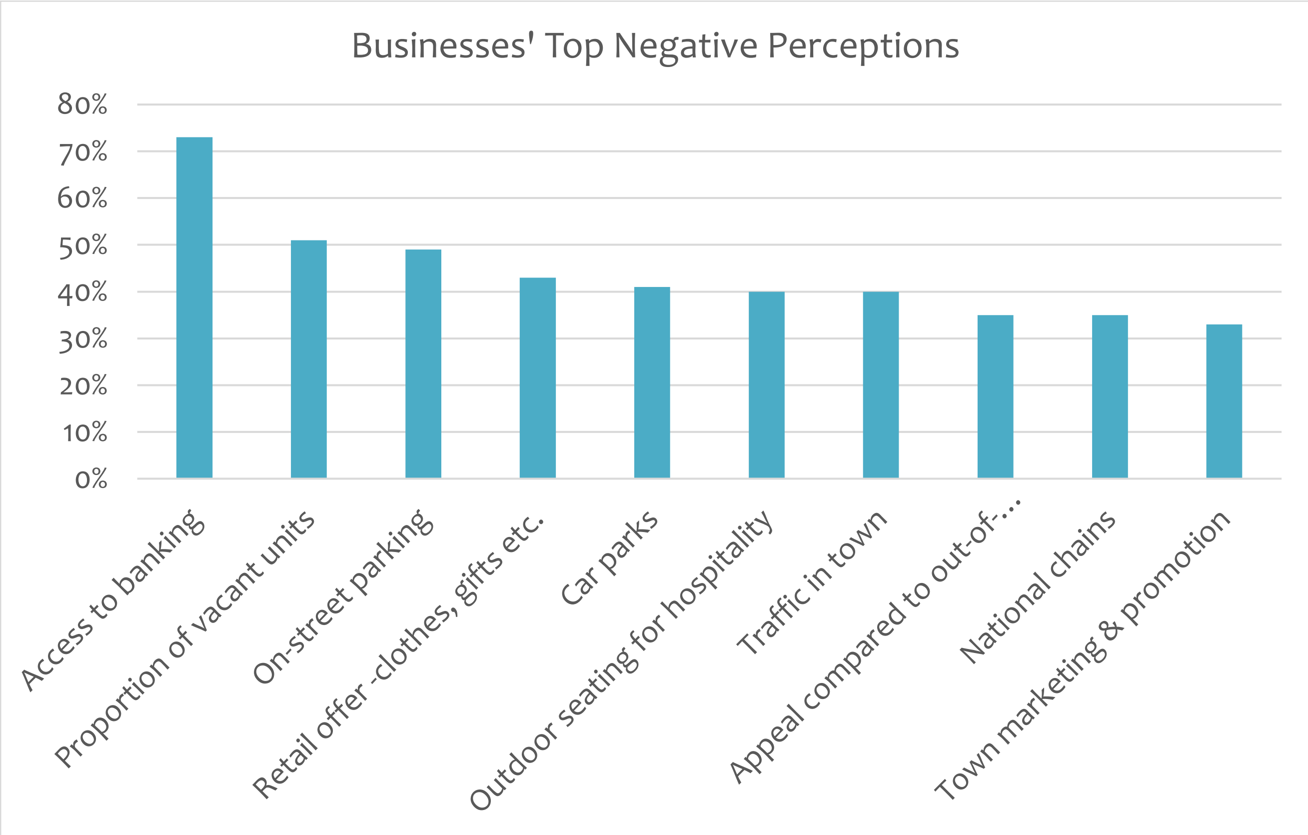
Current negative perceptions for both sets of stakeholders were unsurprisingly topped by access to banking services which have been temporarily lost from the town centre. The limited comparison retail such as fashion and national chains are considered negatively by both businesses and the customers. Traffic, the proportion of vacant premises, outdoor seating and both on and off-street parking are considered as significant negative factors by both. The appeal relative to out-of-town retail and the levels of town-wide marketing are negative perceptions specific to businesses, while negative perceptions about the level of cultural and leisure provision is particular to customers. Only customers perceive the accessibility around the town centre for the elderly and disabled as a significant negative issue.

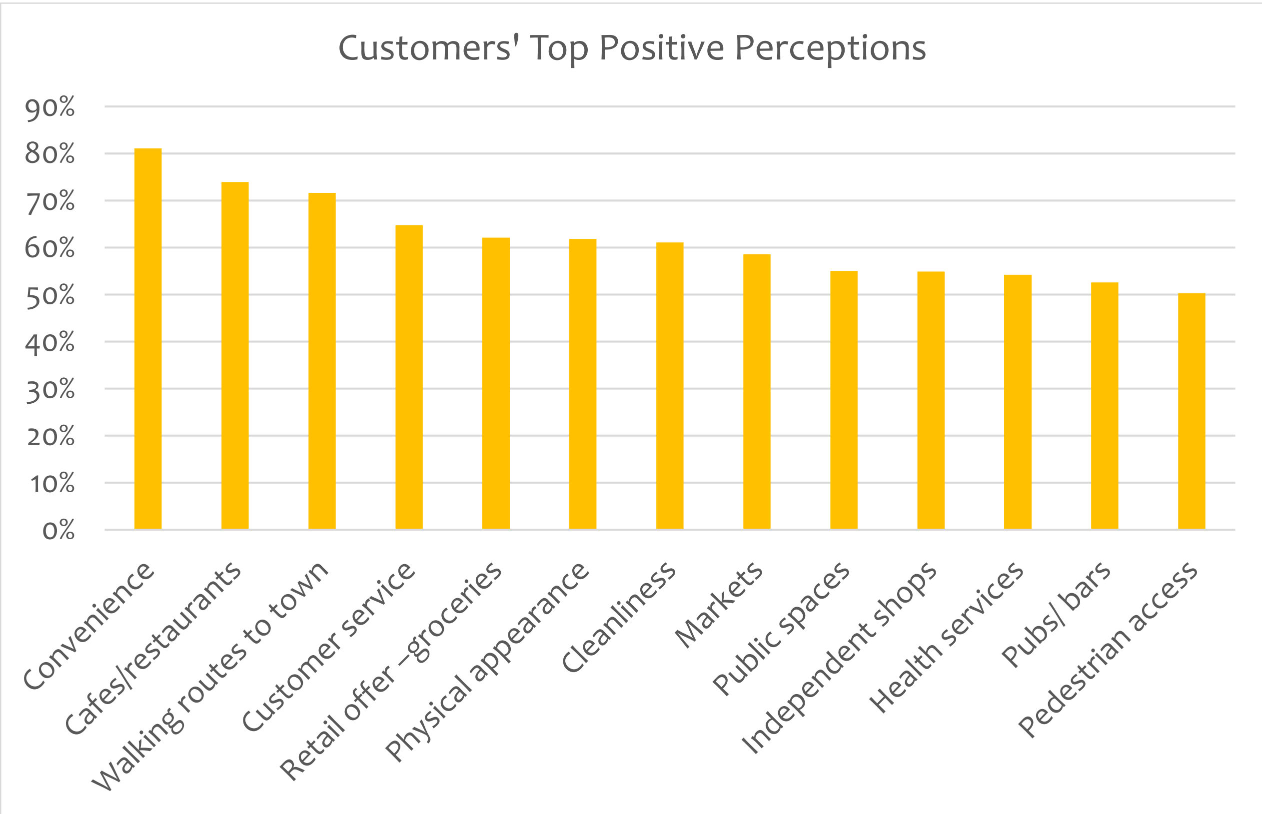
Comparing Business and Customer Priorities

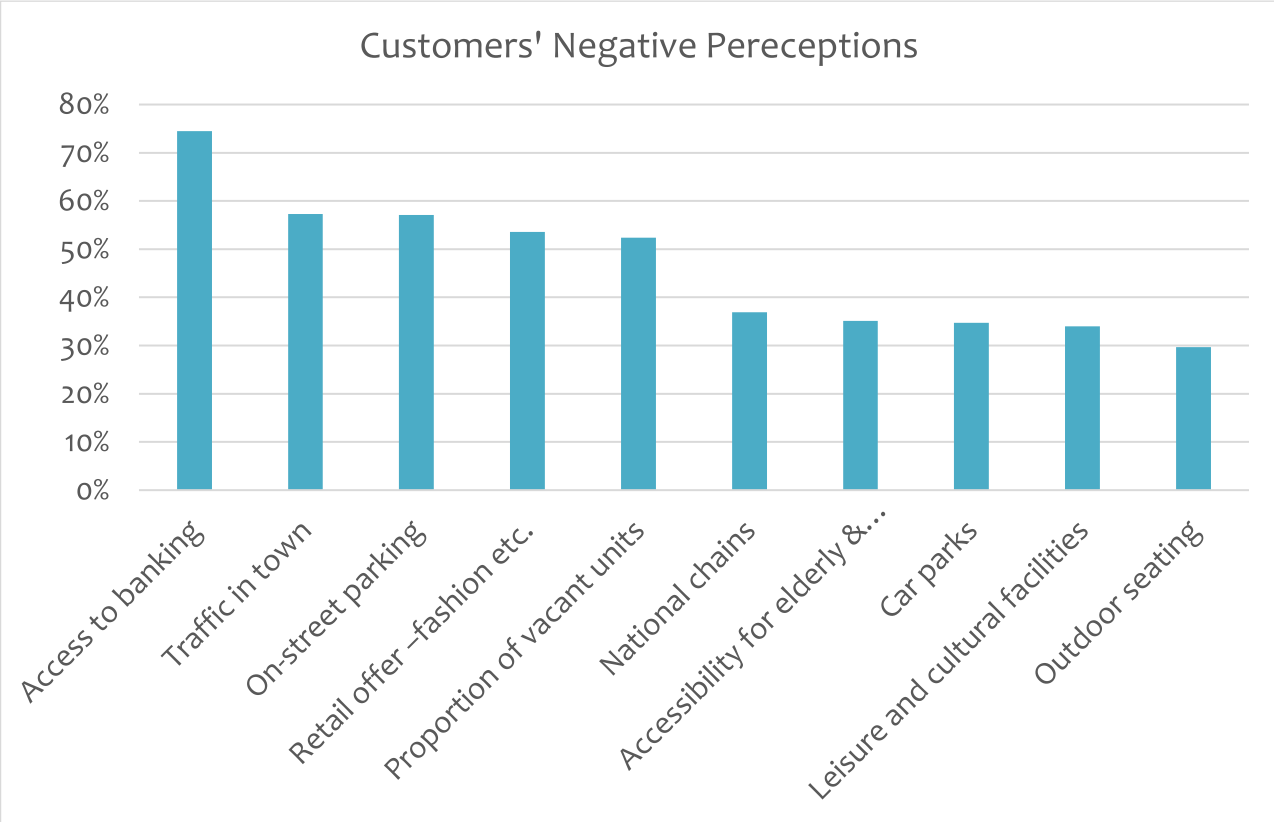
There is a broad level of synergy between businesses and customers' priorities for improving Buckingham town centre. Of customers' priorities receiving a significant response from at least 3% of those surveyed, retail and business mix combined, traffic management, banking, parking management, accessibility, anti-social behaviour and public transport all receive similarly significant responses from businesses. Issues such as free parking, pedestrianisation and paving are relatable to sub-categories of high priorities of businesses. Customers' high priority for events and activities is not matched by business responses. Similarly, only businesses give a high priority to improving the appearance of the town centre and boosting the town's brand and marketing.

Combined with the anlaysis of negative perceptions for both sets of stakeholders, this analysis points to a need to address aspects of the town centre's changing business mix, as well as elements of travel to town and around town. Concerns about banking provision have been at least in-part addressed through the openning of the permanent Banking Hub. These priorities strenghthen businesses' cases for improved town-wide marketing that might focus on Buckigham's recognised strengths. These priorities add to customers' concerns and the case for greater investment in cultural/leisure facilities and events.

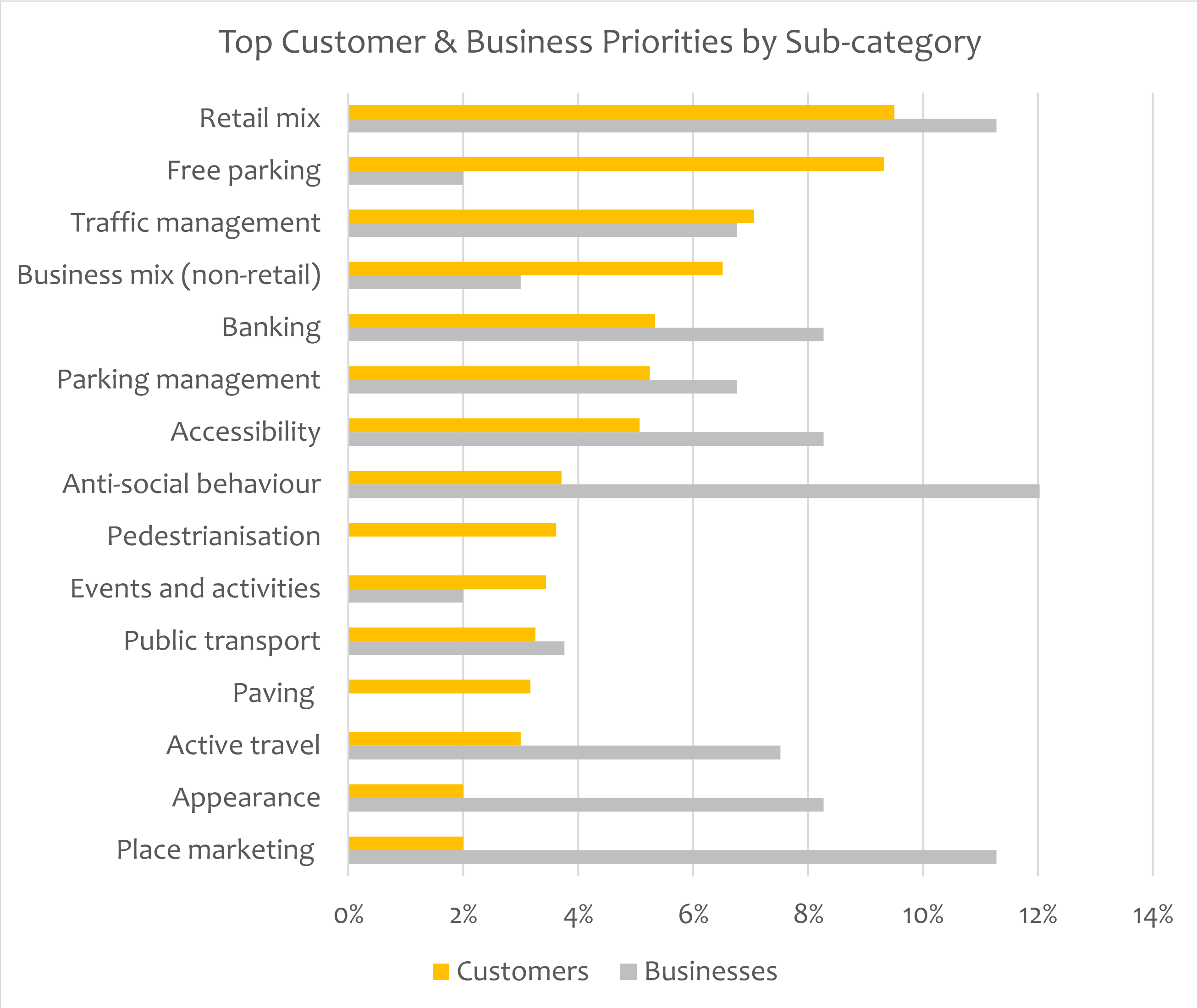



Businesses' Top Negative Perceptions
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
Access to banking
Proportion of vacant units
On-street parking
Retail offer -clothes, gifts etc.
Car parks
Outdoor seating for hospitality
Traffic in town
Appeal compared to out-of-…
National chains
Town marketing & promotion


Customers' Top Positive Perceptions
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
Convenience
Cafes/restaurants
Walking routes to town
Customer service
Retail offer –groceries
Physical appearance
Cleanliness
Markets
Public spaces
Independent shops
Health services
Pubs/ bars
Pedestrian access

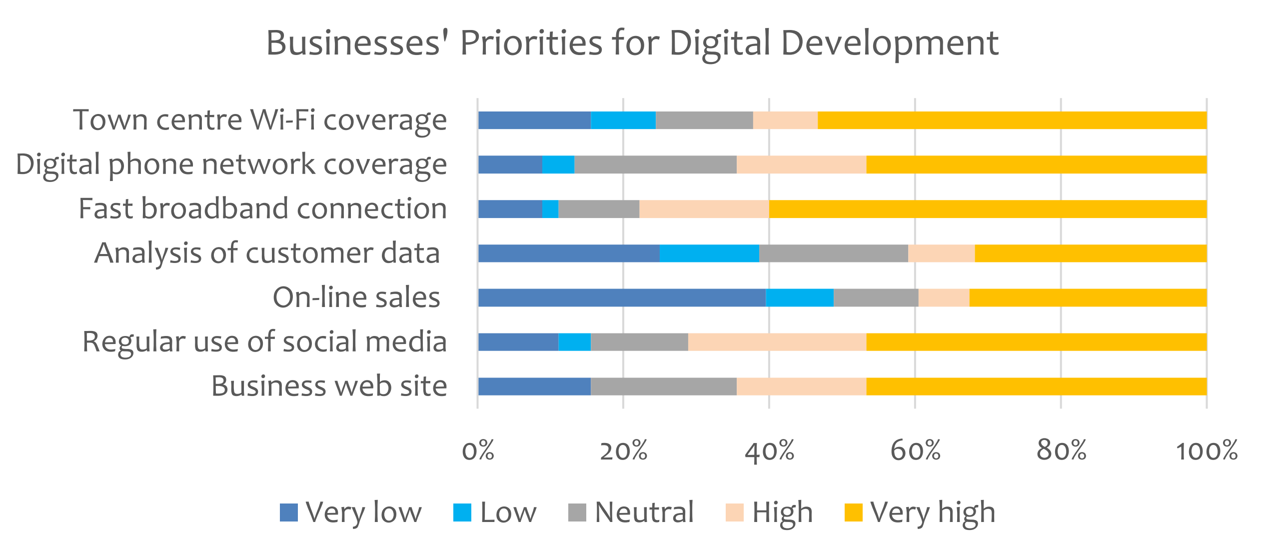


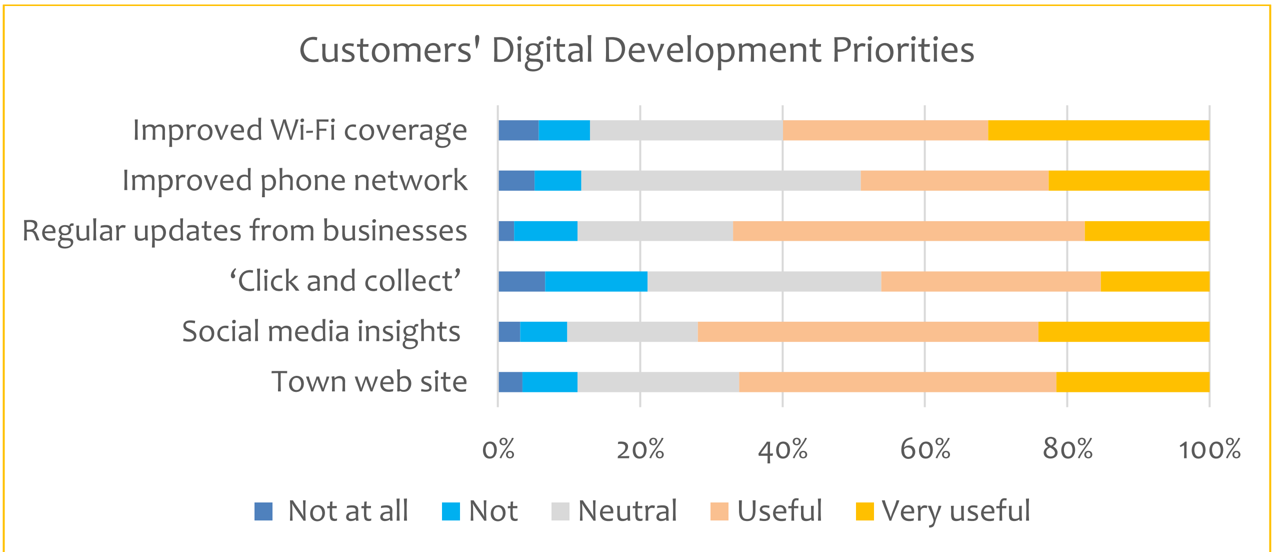
Businesses' Top Priorities	% of total	Customers' Top Priorities	% of total
Anti-social behaviour	12%	Retail mix	10%
Retail mix	11%	Free parking	9%
Place marketing	11%	Traffic management	7%
Banking	8%	Business mix (non-retail)	7%
Appearance	8%	Banking	5%
Accessibility	8%	Parking management	5%
Active travel	8%	Accessibility	5%
Parking management	7%	Anti-social behaviour	4%
Traffic management	7%	Pedestrianisation	4%
Public transport	4%	Events and activities	3%
Hospitality	3%	Public transport	3%
		Paving	3%


Top Customer & Business Priorities by Sub-category
Retail mix
Free parking
Traffic management
Business mix (non-retail)
Banking
Parking management
Accessibility
Anti-social behaviour
Pedestrianisation
Events and activities
Public transport
Paving
Active travel
Appearance
Place marketing
0%
2%
4%
6%
8%
10%
12%
14%
Customers
Businesses

Digital Development Opportunities

Both businesses and customers were given a similar set of prompts to determine their digital development priorities for Buckingham town centre. As is normal, businesses gave a slightly higher priority to continued investment in town centre digital infrastructure including continued investment in fast broadband connections which was a high or very high priority for 78% of respondents. Businesses did give a high or very high priority to them providing regular social media updates (71%) and creation and management of their own web sites (65%).





Customers gave a higher priority to the development of services that make use of improved infrastructure with a high proportion ranking as useful or very useful, social media insights (72%), the creation and management of a town web site (67%) and receiving regular updates from businesses about products, services or events (67%). Customers gave a moderately high priority to good Wi-Fi coverage (60%).

Local Leadership: Creating a Forward Framework

For a partnership to evolve in its effectiveness, it is important to plan for constant progress through regular review and writing things down! This can be achieved by annually reviewing the town centre checklist provided by Local Government Association's Revitalising Town Centres Toolkit and updating a 'Forward Framework' comprising an over-arching strategy and two component plans: an organisational or business plan covering the 'how' of revitalisation and an action plan covering the 'what'.

The 'How' of Town Centre Revitalisation : People & Partnerships

Revitalising a town centre is a complex and long-term venture. It is as important to focus on the people and partnerships necessary to drive success as it is to focus on the 'what' of delivering projects. Experience shows that it requires resources and leadership to make things happen in this way and that it should not be left to chance. The Local Government Association's Revitalising Town Centres refers to the 'f' factors for success as a guide for structuring an organisational or business development plan.

These 'f' factors begin with the 'foundations' that include creating the evidence base and engaging stakeholders to help determine priorities, as being undertaken here. A next consideration is the 'form' of an organisation necessary to move things forward and this covers its set-up, structure, governance, partnerships and legal status. The form of a partnership should follow its 'function'. Key determinants of this organisational form to consider include: the balance sought between being a consultative partner or can-do delivery body; available financial support and the need for independent fund raising; and close alignment with council policy verses the capacity to reach-out, engage with and empower sectors of the community.

There are many variations of the organisational models available for leading town centre revitalisation. Different options for organisational form include: council-led partnerships which coordinate activity and often inform policy; business-led town teams which can be very "can-do" and have a marketing focus; neighbourhood planning groups which can help shape future growth and its impact on a town centre; development trusts which are very adept in managing community-owned property; and Business Improvement Districts (BID) which combine financial independence and business leadership. The appropriate organisational form is also likely to evolve over time and two organisations can work side-by-side with clearly defined and well-coordinated roles.

An organisational business plan covering the foundations, form, folk and organisational finances will determine whether there is an effective and sustainable partnership able to deliver improvements. This organisational plan should define the inter-relationship and respective roles of partners such as the local authority(ies), town council, business partners, civic society, chamber of commerce or a BID.

Overleaf is a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to partnership development which has been taken from a case study of creating talented town teams prepared by the People & Places Partnership for the LGA.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Different Approaches to Partnership Development		
Approach	Advantages	Disadvantages
Council-led partnership	Close connection to other council departments; budget provided	Vulnerable to council budgetary pressures; can be difficult to fully engage with community & businesses
Council-coordinated partnership	Good connections to council departments; brings stakeholders together if clear purpose and/or delegated budget	Vulnerable to changing priorities; can create imbalance between action & strategic influence if role unclear
Town centre manager & forum	Partly arms-length though probable budget contribution from council	Vulnerable to cuts; important to get balance between strategic influence and engaging with business & community
Town council hosted partnership	Close local links; arms-length though conduit between authorities; modest budget need and ability to access some external funds	The 'can do' attitude can be stifled if too formal; can be difficult to fully engage with businesses without suitable sub-group of link to Chamber of Trade, for example
Business-led town team	Business-like approach & understanding of economic issues and collective marketing	No assured funding stream; can have narrow business focus & lack strategic influence
Neighbourhood Plan group	Considers wider economic and community planning; exerts long-term influence	Long-term and strategic process; can lack tangible, short-term impacts or town centre focus
Development trust	Capital asset base generates revenue income; strong community focus	Requires available property and large capital investment; can have narrow focus & lack strategic influence
Business Improvement District	Income stream from rates levy; strong business focus and contacts	Can have narrow business focus & lack strategic influence if not part of wider strategy alongside council
Public-private partnership	Combine council and commercial expertise and investment with strong development focus to deliver key sites	Likely to have a narrow, site-based focus and limited life though should sit within wider strategy

Obviously, in a town like Buckingham, there are existing partners already involved at least in-part in seeking to shape the future of the town centre and wider community. These include the Town Council, Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group and Buckinghamshire Council. It will be important for these and other partners to begin to determine how they will continue to work together going forward as part of an organisational or business plan covering the 'how' of revitalisation.

Action planning: A Timetable for Change

A town centre action plan is necessary to determine and define objectives, projects, responsibilities, budgets, timescales, outcomes and impact measures as the building blocks of the coordinated delivery of improvements on the ground. The annual review of such an action plan should begin and end with a review of available evidence and the monitoring of impacts and changes. This needs to be developed alongside or as part of delivery and governance proposals for the Neighbourhood Plan.

The draft recommendations in the final section of this report, focus on the activities that would need to be included in a town centre action plan to deliver the 'what' of town centre revitalisation.

Delivering Change: Recommendations

This section of the report focuses on the activities that would need to be included in a town centre action plan to deliver the 'what' of town centre revitalisation. It is subdivided in to physical changes or the 'look' of the town centre as short-hand and the 'feel' or softer changes that involve how places are promoted and animated. It is currently written as proposals for consideration that can be updated later as agreed recommendations.

The 'Look'

Planning and property

Planning policy and development has a pivotal role in underpinning long-term revitalisation when combined with an understanding of hands-on place leadership for town and city centres.

It will be important for the Buckingham Neighbourhood Plan Working Group to work closer with Buckinghamshire Council to make use of the current opportunity to review the vision, aims and objectives of planning policy in relation to the direct and indirect impacts on the town centre. This can include polices for managing the 'look' of the town through physical changes including the diversification of the mix of town centre businesses and services; enhancing public spaces and historic streetscape; and improving the journey to and around town.

Such an approach will help shape policies and practices outlined below and inform the Local Plan review including previous policy support for the allocation of land for retail, office and mixed development through previously identified sites.

Re-stated objectives can also provide a context for developing policies/plans for the delivery of the town centre's 'feel' through softer non-statutory interventions such as business support, events organisation and marketing.

Analysis of the proportion of properties occupied by different use classes in 2023, shows that nearly three-quarters (71%) of town centre premises are now occupied by businesses within use class E and therefore their owners do not have to get planning permission to change the use of their building. This offers a positive impact in making re-lettings easier to achieve though can enable the mix of different businesses to become skewed. Another point to note is the, for now, modest change of use from business to domestic use. Both factors are trends to continue monitor and respond to with policies, where appropriate and as possible.

Beneath these aims and objectives, the Neighbourhood Plan Working Group with partners could investigate what options there are for maintaining the primary and secondary retail frontages including restricting permitted development as housing. Over the four-year period between 2019 and 2023 there had been a significant flux in the business mix with over 40% of business premises having changed in use.

The Town Council also previously had a Community Action to produce a Community Building Strategy including proposals for a new cultural arts venue, sports facilities, a community building and a venue for religious services. It will be good to review progress and next steps with this action.

Travel to town

The perceptions and practicalities of how people travel to town, congestion caused, parking provision and alternative sustainable options, can have a profound impact on the frequency of visits.

Through planned further consultation on the Buckingham Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan -Lite, there is the opportunity for the Town Council, Neighbourhood Plan Working Group and other local stakeholders to work together to influence and help prioritise the recommendations for future improvement during the next stage.

Key national active travel benchmarks help assess the potential to increase current levels of walking and cycling in Buckingham. Nationally, nearly half of people (49%) walk or wheel five or more days per week and the most popular reason is to reach a particular destination, e.g. work, shopping (51%); followed by enjoyment or fitness (42%). The Buckingham customer survey responses indicate comparable levels of activity with perhaps scope to achieve even more of a modal shift in the 50% of residents who regularly travel to town by foot as their primary means, to target the 25% who choose to walk as their second-choice travel mode. According to national data, popular changes that could encourage residents to walk more are to create nicer places along streets to rest (78%), followed by better pavement accessibility (74%).

Important benchmarks about the potential for cycling include that only 15% of people cycle regularly and the most popular purpose for cycling are work (34%) and shopping, personal business and social trips (33%). This compares to only 1% of Buckingham town centre users travel by bike as their primary mode of transport, with scope to potentially build-on the 4% and 3% respectively who cycle as a secondary option. Top popular personal improvements to encourage cycling include access or improvements to a cycle sharing scheme (47%), whilst the most popular infrastructure investment for encouraging more cycling was more traffic-free cycle routes away from roads, e.g. through parks or along waterways (67%).

Calls for improvements to more sustainable modes of transport (6%) made-up a significant proportion of the overall customer responses in the survey undertaken for this review. This included calls for the prioritisation of improvements to public transport provision (3%), cycling infrastructure (2%) and walking routes into town (1%).

Traffic levels and both on and off-street parking, are considered as significant negative characteristics of the town centre by both businesses and customers. From businesses' perspective, the broad theme of travel to town (27%) got the greatest response when businesses were asked their top two future priorities, and within this pedestrian access (8%), active travel (8%), parking management (8%) and traffic management shared similar response rates.

Within a variety of issues relating to customers' experiences of travel to town, comments covering perceived high levels of traffic in the town centre were prominent (7%). Amongst comments about wider parking management (5%), many responses related to the Cornwalls' Meadow Car Park and especially to the unreliability of payment machines, which could be readily resolved to provide a 'quick win'.

It appears there is considerable scope to update and further strengthen already incisive policies under the Neighbourhood Plan objective for improving movement into and around the town in a healthy and safe manner.

The Neighbourhood Plan's section on infrastructure provides a clear objective to improve movement into and around the town with a specific policy commitment that pedestrian routes should be made suitable for disabled access, including the provision of seating as rest points. In addition, there is a community commitment that the Town Council strongly supports the provision of good connections, via pedestrian and cycle links.

The section on developer contributions includes a recommended Community Action to seek contributions towards providing new pedestrian and cycle links. It was also proposed that improved public transport could be provided along Tingewick Road that encompasses new developments.

The Town Council and Neighbourhood Plan Working Group can work closely with Buckinghamshire Council departments to determine the potential scope and feasibility of undertaking reviews, plan preparation and delivery covering:

- The reduction/amelioration of the impacts of traffic on travel to and within the town centre.
- The delivery of cycling and walking improvements to encourage increased active travel to the town centre, in conjunction with the full Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan development being led by Wiltshire Council. This will include pursuing the delivery of active travel routes where developer funding contributions have or could be determined.
- Quick win parking improvements such as the upgrading of payment machines in Cornwalls' Meadow and potentially a wider review of off and on-street parking provision using a customer-focused approach such as the People, Places & Parking process developed by People & Places. Such a wider review should consider the previous Neighbourhood Plan policy for providing additional town centre car parking.
- The possibility of enhanced public transport to the town centre from surrounding villages.

Streetscape and access

Creating well-designed and accessible streetscapes has a leading role in enabling prosperous and welcoming places for the benefit of both businesses and residents.

The list of survey responses about the top positive perceptions about Buckingham's town centre environment for both business and customer stakeholders, feature cleanliness, public spaces, physical appearance and the ability to walk to town. In contrast, outdoor seating provision is considered as a significant negative factor by both, while only customers perceive the accessibility around the town centre for the elderly and disabled as a significant negative issue.

The broad themes of streetscape and appearance was the third highest future priority of businesses (20%), with appearance (8%) and pedestrian access (8%) prominent within this.

Priority given by customers to improving public access across the town centre (14%) included the prioritisation of better accessibility (5%) through improved conditions for walking, wheeling and road crossings, alongside specific calls for pedestrianisation schemes (4%) mostly covering the Market Place and mentions of the need to improve footpath paving (3%). Calls for a range of streetscape improvements (3%) included cleanliness (2%), built heritage (2%) and the physical appearance of the town centre (1%).

The Neighbourhood Planning Working Group could seek to expand the Plan's section on design, heritage and environment to reflect these concerns and include policies and proposals for conserving and enhancing Buckingham's built heritage, historic setting and public spaces.

The section on culture and leisure included a policy for protecting and retaining identified green and open spaces as designated Local Green Space. It might be good to also include the aspiration to enhance them including by the riverside and Cornwall Meadows car park.

An additional community-based action might be that the feasibility is investigated with Buckinghamshire Council for involving local stakeholders in undertaking a deliverable audit of town centre access improvements.

The 'Feel'

The Town Council, Neighbourhood Plan Working Group and partners can also determine how policies/plans and plans are shaped for the delivery of the town centre's 'feel' through softer non-statutory interventions such as business support, leisure and cultural activity and marketing and events organisation.

Business diversification

Through a town-wide and evidence-based understanding of changing customer habits and demands, the Town Council and partners can support town centre businesses in adapting as well as creating new business opportunities.

Over the period between 2019 and 2023, just under a quarter (23%) of business premises in Buckingham town changed in tenant and/or type of business use. The vacancy rates of 9% is typical for a town of Buckingham's size, though with 43% of businesses reporting that their profitability was reduced or greatly reduced over the preceding 12 months, the indication is that many more are perhaps vulnerable to closure.

The levels of comparison retail such as fashion and national chains are considered negatively by both Buckingham businesses and the customers, as is the proportion of vacant premises. In contrast, the list of top positive perceptions for both sets of stakeholders feature cafes and restaurants, pubs, independent shops, grocery retail, markets and access to health services are also all aspects of the mix of businesses that are viewed positively.

The broad theme of the mix of businesses and services (25%) was the second highest future priority for Buckingham's businesses with the imbalance of the town centre retail mix (11%) and banking provision (8%) at the time prominent within this.

The businesses and services mix (30%) was the broad theme that received the highest level of responses when customers were asked to give their top two priorities for the future of the town centre. Looking in detail at the responses about the business mix alone, calls to improve the retail mix in Buckingham town centre accounted for 10% of responses and priorities for improving a perceived imbalance of the wider mix accounted for a further 7% of responses. In terms of services there was a significant number of calls for improved banking there were a significant number of responses (2%) relating to health service provision because of both its perceived importance and high demand, as well as calls to improve the market (2%).

Previous town centre policies the Buckingham Plan included retaining and enhancing both the primary and secondary retail frontages. In addition, the culture, leisure and health section included a policy for the provision of new or extended health care facilities on two existing sites at the Community Hospital and on Verney Close.

Leisure and culture

The provision of cultural and leisure facilities and activities is a key part of broadening the role and appeal of town centres as multi-purpose places at the heart of their communities and with a wider appeal to visitors.

The "What's On" page of the Discover Buckingham web site and listings on the Town Council web site currently present a busy schedule of monthly events. Many of these are based in and around the town centre and complement its roles as a hub for the local community. Some higher profile events such as Buckingham Live Weekend and Buckingham Summer Festival can also help attract visitors from further afield.

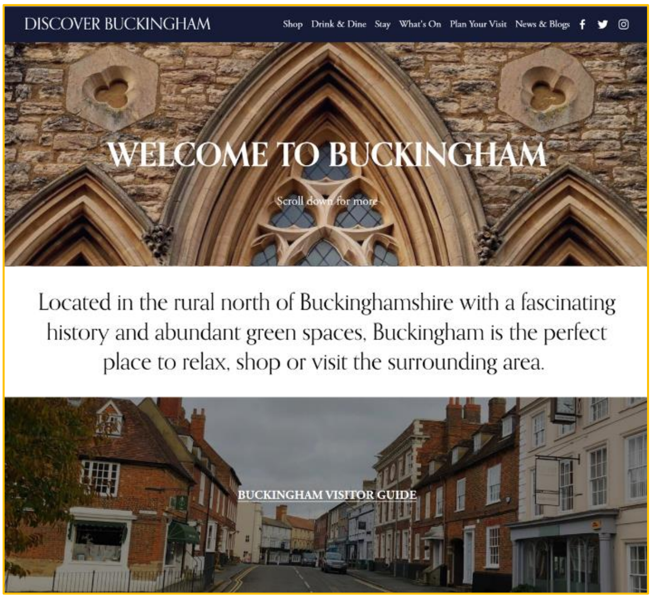
From the survey responses it is apparent that customers have mildly negative perceptions about the current level of cultural and leisure facilities in Buckingham with over a third viewing it negatively (34%), compared to just under a quarter who had a positive perception (23%). Nearly 4 in 10 respondents (39%) were, positive about town centre events though, compared to less than 2 in 10 (18%) who had a negative perspective. In terms of customers top-two future priorities, there was an even spread of calls between a desire to see more town centre events and activities (3%), investing in leisure and cultural facilities (2%) and providing activities for children and young people (2%).

These findings support the Neighbourhood Plan's existing commitment to encourage development that strengthens culture, leisure, sport and play facilities in the town. The culture, leisure and health section included a Community Action to produce a Community Building Strategy including proposals for a new cultural arts venue, sports facilities, a community building and a venue for religious services.

It may be beneficial to add an additional community-based action to support the creation of new cultural and leisure events in town centre public spaces, including for example, more activities for children and young people. These can be added to an annual events programme and listing for the benefit of the local community, with perhaps highlighted sections for different audiences and visitors from further afield.

Place Branding and Marketing

Capturing the changing identity of a town centre and stakeholder /audience perceptions through place branding and marketing, helps strengthen a local sense of place and shapes a positive external image.



As far back as the 2015, the Buckingham Retail Appraisal, Health Check and Opportunities Assessment recognised that better promotion is needed about the town's 'success' and that it is important to build on the positives such as the role as a meeting place with a good social and food offer, including markets.

As well as the informative Discover Buckingham web site, there is a related Instagram account and a Tourist Information Centre Facebook page. Other Facebook pages include a popular Buckingham Events account and a Buckingham Town account that promotes local businesses and services. There are web pages and Facebook accounts specific to particular events and destinations/businesses. A Visit Buckinghamshire web page is no longer operational and a Visit the South East web page includes limited information about Buckingham or events in the town.

The analysis of the Buckingham prospect population size by drive-time shows that there is a population of nearly half a million (454,574) potential customers within a 25-minute drive and that this has grown by a significant 16% (62,480) since 2011. Analysis of Buckingham's competing towns by drive-time, shows that there are 4 towns plus Milton Keynes where 10-minute catchment areas overlap.

The customer survey responses show that grocery shopping is by far the most popular, primary reason (58%) for coming to Buckingham town centre, whilst leisure uses such as using hospitality businesses (35%), account for more than a further third of people's reasons for visiting the town centre.

When customers were asked how their experience of Buckingham town centre had changed in recent years, over a third (37%) reported that it had worsened, with as many reporting that it had changed in a mixture of good and bad ways. When asked if they would recommend a visit to the town centre, nearly two-thirds said 'yes'.

The list of top positive perceptions for both businesses and customers feature cafes and restaurants prominently, and pubs to a slightly lesser extent. Independent shops, grocery retail, markets and access to health services are also all aspects of the mix of businesses and services viewed as making positive contributions to the town centre. Cleanliness, public spaces, physical appearance and the ability to walk to town, all aspects of environment that feature in both lists of positive features. The appeal relative to out-of-town retail and the levels of town-wide marketing are negative perceptions specific to businesses.

When asked to give a single word that sums-up Buckingham town centre, prominent words used included a mix of positive sentiments such as ‘friendly’, ‘pleasant’, ‘convenient’ and ‘quaint’ to more negative descriptions to ‘tired’, ‘decline’, ‘dull’ and ‘traffic’.

Businesses and customers gave a high or very high priority to providing social media insights (72% & 71% respectively). Customers gave a similarly high priority to the creation and management of a town web site (67%) and receiving regular updates from businesses about products, services or events (67%). Just two-thirds of businesses gave a high or very high priority to the creation and management of their own web sites (65%).

In terms of digital infrastructure, businesses gave a high or very high priority to continued investment in fast broadband (78%). Customers gave a moderately high priority to good Wi-Fi coverage (60%).

Place branding and marketing is unsurprisingly not specifically covered by the objectives and policies of the Neighbourhood Plan. It is, however, something that perhaps could be recognised as a Community-based action that cross-references work being led by the Town Council. This could include analysis to capture Buckingham’s current identity in a way that recognises change, accentuates the positives and provides a narrative to pitch to different audiences, beginning with residents.

A communications and marketing plan for the town could cover:

- A positive representation of change and the partnership involved in shaping it including the Town Council, Neighbourhood Plan Working Group and Buckinghamshire Council.
- Targeted social media campaigns aimed at different types of local town centre user by location, e.g. town residents and surrounding villages; or demographic group such as children and young people.
- Training and support for businesses; attractions and local groups to promote themselves and the town in ways that reinforce the collective identity.
- Targeted promotion aimed at visitors that highlights distinctiveness of Buckingham and the appeal of its heritage, events, businesses including hospitality, and attractions.

Town Centre Stewardship

Ensuring the ongoing, routine stewardship of town centres by managing aspects such as litter or ant-social behaviour is essential in managing stakeholders’ perceptions and meeting their needs.

Cleanliness (61%) and safety (49%) were considered as positives by town centre customers. Businesses considered the town centre’s cleanliness as a positive (64%).

There were more balanced opinions from customers about ant-social behaviour with equal numbers considering its absence a positive (23%) compared to those considering its presence a negative (24%). Considering stakeholders' future priorities, it is important to recognise that anti-social behaviour was the sub-theme receiving the highest number of responses, with comments focusing on a perceived lack of police presence to address nuisance caused by people congregating at times in and around the town centre. The need to respond to perceived levels of anti-social behaviour including congregation in public spaces, excessive drinking and a desire for an increased police presence, were a significant priority (4%). The need to respond to perceived levels of anti-social behaviour including congregation in public spaces, excessive drinking and a desire for an increased police presence, were also a significant priority for town centre customers with over 40 (4%) respondents rating it amongst their top two future priorities.

Looking to the future it will be important to maintain and promote the positive perceptions about the towns centre's cleanliness and safety. It will also be important to work with the police to better understand, communicate to stakeholders and address as appropriate, the causes of concerns about anti-social behaviour in the town centre. This could be recognised as a community-based action in the Neighbourhood Plan and/or wider partnership plan.

Next Steps: Making it Happen

This report is a detailed piece of work that necessarily pulls together existing policies/proposals and a stakeholder perspective of issues in a systematic way. Its aim is to provide an action-orientated approach that can be delivered by a coming together of key local partners and a realistic appraisal of priorities and resourcing needs. In this way, it is possible to set about making a meaningful difference to the long-term vitality and viability of Buckingham's town centre. Realistically, this should be viewed as a 5-10 year project that will need extra resources, including organisationally, to coordinate delivery. It will however, be important to deliver quick-wins over the next 12 months to gain stakeholder confidence and increase engagement.

Below are the proposed next steps that partners will need to consider and undertake in the process of developing and delivering a robust partnership and action plan that would be able to aid the town centre's recovery and revitalisation.

1. *Discussion with key partners/stakeholder groups*: This draft report should be presented to and discussed with key partners and stakeholder representatives to finalise it and agree recommendations.
2. *Adapt recommendations for inclusion in Neighbourhood Plan and other local strategies*: Key stakeholder organisations can work through the Neighbourhood Plan Working Group, Town Council and Buckingham & Villages Community Board, to incorporate recommendations within existing plans and strategies.
3. *Potentially publish stakeholder summary*: A short, illustrated version of the of this report and its findings could published by for wider distribution, and as record of findings and actions related to the town centre. Alternatively, a suitable section on the town centre might be included in the Neighbourhood Plan.
4. *Meetings of theme-based sub-groups*: Initial meetings could be organised of theme-based sub-groups to discuss the development of proposals for the 'look' and 'feel' of the town centre and partnership working/governance. People & Places can help assist in determining the membership and format of these groups, as required.
5. *Initial business engagement*: The publication of the summary could be used to begin engagement with businesses through a meeting. This would discuss the findings and future role of businesses including through the formation of a representative group. People & Places can help assist in this as an extension of the current work.
6. *Partnership development and governance*: The existing stakeholders on the Neighbourhood Plan Working Group, Town Council and Buckingham & Villages Community Board, as well as businesses representatives, need to determine the partnership development and governance arrangements for revitalising Buckingham's town centre. This can include focusing on the representation and roles for a core group responsible and equipped to manage the coordination and communication of activity. This needs to be developed alongside or as part of delivery and governance proposals for the Neighbourhood Plan.

7. *Determine initial delivery priorities*: The evolving partnership needs to determine initial delivery priorities that underpin long-term strategy and capacity as well demonstrate 'quick wins' to stakeholders and the wider community. The Shared Prosperity Fund provides an initial and flexible injection of funds to help achieve this.