

Article

High streets and retail areas in Great Britain: March 2026

Interactive analysis of retail areas, covering employment between 2015 and 2024 and the characteristics of people living on and around high streets between 2011 and 2021 (2022 in Scotland). These are official statistics in development.

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1 . Main points

- Retail employment fell more sharply in central high streets and shopping centres than in non-central high streets and retail parks between 2015 and 2024.
- The composition of employment in central high streets between 2015 and 2024 shifted away from retail (a 19% decline) into other sectors, particularly accommodation and food services (an 18% increase).
- Between the 2011 and 2021 censuses (2022 in Scotland), there was minimal change in the proportion of the population living on or around a high street across countries and regions in Great Britain.
- The most recent census estimates show that small town centre high streets have higher proportions of residents aged 65 years and over; major regional centre high streets have higher proportions of younger adult residents.
- The mix of occupations of people living on or around most high streets is generally reflective of Great Britain overall, except for the national centre (Central London), which has notably higher proportions of residents classed as being in professional occupations.

2 . High streets and retail areas geography in 2025

The geography used in this article expands on the groundwork laid by the High Steets project, jointly undertaken by the Office for National Statistics' (ONS's) Centre for Subnational Analysis and Ordnance Survey (OS) in 2019. It now includes shopping centres, retail parks, and other commercial and leisure retail settings.

The OS Retail Areas geography will be released as part of the [OS National Geographic Database \(NGD\)](#) in an upcoming update, at the end of March 2026, under the Public Sector Geospatial Agreement (PSGA).

By linking the ONS's data and other data, we can now compare employment and residential characteristics, based on town and city centres, local centres, and out-of-town retail areas.

These geographies are constructed from clusters of buildings with retail addresses, classified according to consistent rules. More information is available in [Section 7: Data sources and quality](#).

The OS Retail Areas are classified depending on their position within a national retail hierarchy. This is a technical definition based on how the retail addresses cluster within the surrounding built-up area, and not necessarily an indicator of the size or influence of a city, town, or village. Local authorities may have multiple types of retail areas, including a regional centre, a small town centre, and local centres.

The Ordnance Survey's hierarchy classifications are:

- national centre - a single retail area intersecting six central London boroughs
- major regional centre - for example, retail areas in Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow
- regional centre - for example, retail areas in York, Newport, and Bournemouth
- town centre - for example, retail areas in Luton, Dover, and Caerphilly
- small town centre - can feature throughout local authorities, for example Bridport and Lyme Regis, in Dorset
- major district centre, district centre, and local centre - retail areas that do not contain the largest number of retail addresses among all the clusters in their built-up area; they feature throughout Great Britain
- non-urban retail - retail areas that are outside of built-up areas

We group our classifications for some analyses in this article. We refer to small town centres and higher as "central," and to major district centres, district centres, local centres, and non-urban retail as "non-central."

Central high streets: offices, residential, and retail land use in 2025

Addresses in the OS Retail Areas geography are classified into three main categories: retail, residential, and offices. These definitions are different from the Standard Industrial Classifications used in [Section 4: Employment on the high street and other retail areas from 2015 to 2024](#). However, they are a good indication of how the physical buildings on British high streets are currently used. The OS NGD address retail classification covers a broad range of retail uses, including banks, post offices, petrol filling stations, cafes, restaurants, pubs, bars, nightclubs, fast food takeaways, and shops.

Retail addresses accounted for around a third of addresses on central high streets in most countries and regions of Great Britain in June 2025. London had the lowest proportion of retail addresses (18%), being notably more residential than other areas. London also had the highest proportion of office addresses (14%), compared with 10% in central high streets in Great Britain overall.

Figure 1: Land use on the high street

Great Britain, 2025

Notes

1. Only retail areas with the "high street" retail setting are included.
2. Only central retail hierarchies, as in small town centre and higher, are included.
3. Because of rounding, values for some geographies may not sum to 100%.

3 . People living on and around the high street, from 2011 to 2021/2022

Proportion of the population living on or around a high street

Residential addresses represent more than half of all land use in central high streets. These places are more than the location for shopping, working, and leisure; they are also many people's homes.

In this subsection, we look at people living on or around all high streets in the Ordnance Survey (OS) Retail Areas hierarchy, which includes local parades of shops, as well as traditional town and city centre high streets. By this definition, the most recent census estimates show that approximately one fifth of all people in Great Britain live on or around a high street.

Outside of London, where 45.4% of people live close to a high street, the figure ranges from 14.4% in the East of England to 22.0% in the North West.

Local authorities with a higher percentage of their population living on or around a high street are characterised by having large urban centres. Local authorities with the lowest percentage of their population living on or around a high street are more rural.

Between the 2011 Census and Census 2021 (2022 in Scotland), there was minimal change in the proportion of the population living on or around a high street across all countries and regions. This ranged from a 0.5 percentage point decrease in the North East to a 0.3 percentage point increase in London.

When compared with 2011, there are changes in the number of people living around high streets in 2021/22, but this tends to reflect changes in the population overall. For example, in local authorities, there is a notable change in the number of people living on or around a high street (from a 17% decrease to a 31% increase). However, as a proportion of the local authority population, this ranges between a 2.8 percentage points decrease to a 2.7 percentage points growth.

Figure 2: Population living on or around high streets

Great Britain, 2011 to 2021 in England and Wales, and 2011 to 2022 in Scotland

Notes

1. Only retail areas with the "high street" retail setting are included.
2. All retail hierarchies, except for those classified as non-urban retail, are included.
3. City of London and Hackney local authority districts have been combined because of low population counts.
4. Isles of Scilly and Cornwall local authority districts have been combined because of low population counts.
5. Population data for England and Wales are from the 2011 and 2021 Censuses.
6. Population data for Scotland are from the 2011 and 2022 Censuses.

Age profile of residents living on or around central high streets

In this subsection, we describe the characteristics of people living on or around central high streets in more detail.

The population distribution is presented across four age groups:

- young people aged 15 years and under
- young adults aged 16 to 24 years, including many students
- adults aged 25 to 64 years, making up most of the workingage population
- older adults aged 65 years and over

High streets show clear differences in the age profiles of residents across the OS Retail Areas hierarchy. The most recent census estimates show that high streets in small town centres have older resident populations, compared with high streets in other OS Retail Areas hierarchies and the proportion of this age group in Great Britain overall.

High streets in higher OS Retail Area hierarchies have higher proportions of working-age residents. Major regional centre high streets have notably high proportions of younger adult residents, possibly reflecting the presence of students in central city locations.

In 2021/2022, every country and region had higher proportions of residents living in small town centre high streets that were aged 65 years and over than the population of Great Britain as a whole.

Figure 3: Age structure of high street populations

Great Britain, 2021 in England and Wales, and 2022 in Scotland

Notes

1. Only retail areas with the "high street" retail setting are included.
2. Only central retail hierarchies, as in small town centre and higher, are included.
3. Population by age data for England and Wales are from the 2011 and 2021 Censuses.
4. Population by age data for Scotland are from the 2011 and 2022 Censuses.
5. Not all retail hierarchies are present in each country and region in Great Britain.
6. Because of rounding, values for some geographies may not sum to 100%.

Figure 4: Age structure of high street populations in local authorities

2021 in England and Wales and 2022 in Scotland

Notes

1. Only retail areas with the "high street" retail setting are included.
2. Only central retail hierarchies, as in small town centre and higher, are included.
3. City of London and Hackney local authority districts have been combined because of low population counts.
4. Isles of Scilly and Cornwall local authority districts have been combined because of low population counts.
5. Population by age data for England and Wales are from the 2021 Census.
6. Population by age data for Scotland are from the 2022 Census.
7. Not all retail hierarchies are present in each local authority.
8. Because of rounding, values for some geographies may not sum to 100%.

Change in age profiles of people living on or around central high streets

There has been a notable increase in the proportion of residents aged 16 to 24 years in major regional centre high streets. Small town centre high streets in all countries and regions have seen an increase in the percentage of residents aged 65 years and over. However, this is smaller than the increase in this age band in Great Britain overall.

Figure 5: Change in age structure of high street populations

Great Britain, 2011 to 2021 in England and Wales, and 2011 to 2022 in Scotland

Notes

1. The values for Great Britain represent the total population of Great Britain, not just the population living near a high street.
2. For specific retail hierarchies, only retail areas with the "high street" retail setting are included.
3. Population by age data for England and Wales are from the 2011 and 2021 Censuses.
4. Population by age data for Scotland are from the 2011 and 2022 Censuses.
5. Because of rounding, values for some geographies may not sum to 100%

Occupations of people living on or around high streets

Census data from 2021 in England and Wales and 2022 in Scotland provide detail on the occupations of all usual residents aged 16 years and over that are in employment.

National centre (Central London) high street areas have notably higher proportions of residents working in professional occupation categories, compared with other OS Retail Area hierarchies.

Compared with Great Britain overall, there are lower proportions of residents who work in skilled trade occupations on or around high street areas across all OS Retail Area hierarchies, except for small town centres.

The mix of occupations of people living on or around high streets in other OS Retail Area hierarchies is generally more reflective of Great Britain overall.

Figure 6: Occupations of people living on or around high streets

2021 in England and Wales and 2022 in Scotland

Notes

1. The values for Great Britain refer to the total employed population aged 16 years and over in Great Britain, not just the population living on or around a high street.
2. For retail hierarchies, only retail areas with the "high street" retail setting are included.
3. Because of rounding, values for some retail hierarchies may not sum to 100%.

4 . Employment on the high street and other retail areas, from 2015 to 2024

Retail employment by setting and centrality

This section looks at employment as measured by our Business Register and Employment Survey.

Figure 7 shows that declines in retail employment between 2015 and 2024 were larger in central locations, when compared with non-central locations. In Great Britain, retail employment declined by 19% in central high streets in this period and by 31% in central shopping centres. By contrast, retail employment declined by 6% in non-central high streets, and by 2% in retail parks.

There was a very similar pattern across countries and regions in Great Britain in this period. Retail employment in non-central high streets and retail parks typically fared better than retail employment in central high streets and shopping centres.

Figure 7: Retail employment by type of OS Retail Area

Great Britain, 2015 to 2024

Employment by industry on central high streets

Between 2015 and 2024, employment in central high streets in Great Britain showed a composition shift away from retail and into other sectors, particularly accommodation and food services. Figure 8 shows that employment in central high streets rose by 18% in the Accommodation and Food Services sector, while employment declined by 19% in the Retail sector.

While exact numbers differ, this is similar across most countries and regions. As retail employment declined in each case over the period, employment increased in other sectors, such as Accommodation and Food Services or Other Services.

Figure 8: Employment on central high streets by sector

2015 to 2024

Notes

1. Only retail areas with the "high street" retail setting are included.
2. Only central retail hierarchies, as in small town centre and higher, are included.

5 . Data on high streets and retail areas

[Population living on or around high streets in Great Britain](#)

Dataset | Released 10 March 2026

Data on the resident population of high streets in Great Britain, its constituent countries and regions, local authority districts and the different retail area hierarchies defined by Ordnance Survey, using census data.

[Occupation of people living on the high street in Great Britain](#)

Dataset | Released 10 March 2026

Data on the occupations of high street residents in Great Britain and the different retail area hierarchies defined by Ordnance Survey, using census data.

[Land use on the high street in Great Britain](#)

Dataset | Released 10 March 2026

Data on the use of buildings on high streets in Great Britain and its constituent countries and regions, using the classification of physical addresses by Ordnance Survey.

[Employment on the high street in Great Britain](#)

Dataset | Released 10 March 2026

Data on relative employment on high streets in Great Britain, its constituent countries and regions, and Ordnance Survey retail area hierarchies, using Business Register and Employment Survey data.

[Age structure of high street populations in Great Britain](#)

Dataset | Released 10 March 2026

Data on the resident population, split by broad age groups, of high streets in Great Britain, its constituent countries and regions, local authority districts, and Ordnance Survey retail area hierarchies, using census data.

6 . Glossary

Built-up area geography

Built-up areas (BUAs) are a geography based on the physical built environment, using Ordnance Survey topographic data to recognise developed land, such as cities, towns, and villages. More information is published in our [Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021 article](#).

7 . Data sources and quality

Ordnance Survey Retail Areas geography

The geography used in this article expands on the groundwork laid by the High Streets project, jointly undertaken by the Office for National Statistics's (ONS's) Centre for Subnational Analysis and Ordnance Survey (OS) in 2019.

The OS Retail Areas geography is built by aggregating clusters of buildings with retail addresses. It describes areas of retail across Great Britain, from high streets and local shopping areas to out-of-town retail parks and shopping centres. The OS Retail Areas geography is developed from [OS National Geographic Database \(NGD\) Address](#)

Each aggregated cluster is classified according to its position within a national retail hierarchy. For some analyses in this article, we have grouped the hierarchy categories to represent central and non-central areas.

Central retail areas

These all contain the most retail addresses among all aggregated clusters in the associated built-up area:

- national centre (Central London)
- major regional centre
- regional centre
- town centre
- small town centre

Non-central retail areas

These do not contain the most retail addresses among all aggregated clusters in the associated built-up area:

- major district centre
- district centre
- local centre
- non-urban retail, which is not contained by a built-up area

Ordnance Survey retail settings

Other OS retail settings discussed in this article include:

- high streets
- shopping centres
- retail parks

The OS Retail Areas geography also contains the following smaller retail settings, but we have not included these in this article:

- commercial
- medical
- holiday accommodation
- attraction
- sports
- transport

Business Register and Employment Survey

Our [Business Register and Employment Survey \(BRES\)](#) is the official source of employee and employment estimates by detailed geography and industry. Employment is obtained by adding the number of working owners to the number of employees. Working owners include sole traders, sole proprietors and partners who receive drawings and/or a share of profits but are not paid via HM Revenue and Customs' (HMRC's) Pay As You Earn (PAYE) system.

The BRES definition of an employee is anyone working on the BRES reference date who is aged 16 years or over that the contributor directly pays from its payroll, in return for carrying out a full-time or part-time job or being on a training scheme.

This article uses de-identified postcode-level BRES data to achieve a close capture around OS Retail Areas. Data are aggregated to higher geographies to support statistical and commercial confidentiality. The construction of the OS geography means that in a small number of cases, the postcode capture areas overlap each other, most notably shopping centres in urban areas, which are adjacent to or surrounded by high streets. In this case we have allocated the employment data to the shopping centre itself, rather than the high street.

Census 2021/2022

The data for population extend beyond the high street itself so they include people living within approximately 200 metres of each high street. We calculated these figures using Output Area population-weighted centroids, and the capture area can also sometimes include nearby shopping centres and transport hubs.

We have used census data for Output Areas because they provide consistent small area estimates across Great Britain.

Address classifications (land use)

Address classifications in this article are taken from the OS NGD.

Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) 2007 used in this article

- The Retail sector includes Section part G, Division 47.
- The Accommodation and Food Services includes Section I.
- The Other service Industries includes Sections J, K, L, M, N, R, S, T, and U.
- The Health, Education, Public Administration includes sections O, P, and Q.

Quality

Statistics presented in this article are comparable over time on a consistent basis. However, because they are calculated on the OS Retail Areas geographies, which were captured in June 2025, we can only estimate employment and population on and around high streets and other retail settings based on the geography at that point in time. The aim of this article and the publication of the Ordnance Survey geography in 2026 is to provide a stable base for analysis from this point forwards .

Statistics in this article are not comparable with our previous high streets analyses because of differences in the underlying geography and the data sources. However, broad trends observed in our 2019 and 2020 research remain consistent.

8 . Related links

[High streets in Great Britain: March, 2020](#)

Article | Released 10 August 2020

Mapping the location and characteristics of High Streets in Great Britain, working with experimental Ordnance Survey High Street geography and Office for National Statistics data.

[Access to local amenities in England and Wales: October 2024](#)

Bulletin | Released 17 October 2024

Interactive analysis of access to amenities, including post offices, cashpoints and parks, as well as travel time estimates to railway stations and libraries.

9 . Cite this statistical bulletin

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