UK 2024 VITALITY INDEX

A DEFINITIVE HEALTH CHECK
ON THE UK'S TOWNS AND CITIES

Lambert
Smith
Hampton

23 DATASETS 100 LOCATIONS LIFE SATISFACTION RETAIL SPEND EMPLOYMENT GROWTH RECYCLING RATES SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS GREEN SPACE PROPERTY INVESTMENT CRIME RATES EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT HOUSING DELIVERY WAGES

Welcome to the 2024 UK Vitality Index, LSH's eleventh annual assessment measuring the health of the UK's largest towns and cities outside London.

Divided into three distinct pillars, the main index utilises 18 datasets to identify the best places to live and work in the UK, with the strongest growth prospects. By incorporating a varied range of indicators encompassing Economy & Business, Living and Health & Environment, the report takes a holistic approach in assessing the vitality of towns and cities.

The Vitality Index covers the 100 largest towns and cities by population outside London. Now in its fourth year, a separate Opportunity Index is also included alongside the Vitality Index. This identifies the locations with the greatest potential to overcome existing challenges and grow.

2023 was admittedly a challenging backdrop for the UK's urban centres, characterised by an ongoing cost of living crisis and an escalation of interest rates. However, notwithstanding the prospect of an election at some point in the year, economic conditions are at least appearing more certain and stable as we head into 2024.

And, despite the economic challenges, many urban centres witnessed improvements across a host of indicators over the last year. This report shines a light on each location's resilience and adaptability, providing insight into their potential for growth in an ever-changing world.

HEADLINES

2024 TOP TEN

1. WATFORD
2. WOKING
3. HIGH WYCOMBE
4. HEMEL HEMPSTEAD
5. WINDSOR & MAIDENHEAD
6. CAMBRIDGE
7. BATH
8. MILTON KEYNES
9. CHELMSFORD
10. EDINBURGH

WATFORD TOP FOR THE FIRST TIME

WOKING IS SECOND ONCE AGAIN

CHELMSFORD MAKES DEBUT TOP 10 APPEARANCE

SOUTH DOMINATES THE RANKING

EDINBURGH RETURNS TO THE TOP 10

CAMBRIDGE ON TOP FOR LIVING

KEY FINDINGS

WATFORD WINS IT!

For the first time, Watford is crowned as the UK's top-ranked location in the 2024 Vitality Index. The Hertfordshire town climbed from third position last year to knock Bath off top spot. Having only debuted in the Top 10 in 2022, Watford's steady climb reflects a transformation in its relative standing among the UK's largest centres.

Watford's winning overall position is driven by its top ranked performance in the Economy & Business pillar, which includes top scores in four of the pillar's seven metrics. Watford also performs well in other areas, securing tenth and eleventh position in the Health & Environment and Living pillars respectively.

WOKING STAYS IN THE MIX

Woking takes second place for a second successive year in this year's overall ranking. The Surrey town is a stalwart in the Index's upper echelons, maintaining a top five position over the past five years. Woking draws much of its strength from the Health & Environment pillar, which it has topped for three years running and includes high scores for life satisfaction and quantity of green space.

Completing the podium spots, High Wycombe is ranked in third place. The Buckinghamshire town is ranked highly on both the Living and the Health & Environment pillars, achieving especially strong scores for GCSE attainment and low rates of cardiovascular mortality.

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

The South of England continues to dominate the Top 10, with nine of the 10 leading locations situated within the UK's southern regions. Notably, the top five are all located near London, with their success reflecting both the influence of London's economic strength on the one hand, alongside the benefits arguably less associated with major conurbations, such as high quality of life and access to green space.

This includes Windsor and Maidenhead, which for four consecutive years has remained in the overall top five. Windsor and Maidenhead continues to excel in the Health & Environment pillar, achieving the highest possible score in cardiovascular mortality rate and quantity of green space.

Edinburgh is the one clear exception, rebounding by 11 places from last year to secure tenth position. This marks the Scottish capital's return to the Top 10 following a brief absence last year. Its Top 10 return is primarily attributed to its high rank on the Living pillar, specifically in the relative growth of house prices and the percentage of affluent households.

CHELMSFORD CHECKS IN

In ninth place, Chelmsford makes its debut appearance in the Top 10 in 2024 having narrowly missed out last year. The rise is largely due to its improved position on the Economy & Business pillar, scoring strongly on job growth and business density. Meanwhile, following a four-year hiatus prior to 2022, Milton Keynes retained a spot in the Top 10 again this year, albeit dropping two places to eighth.

In sixth and seventh place respectively, Cambridge and Bath are regularly found in the overall Top 10. Cambridge continues its streak as the only location to have consistently featured in the Top 10 since the Vitality Index's inauguration over a decade ago, while last year's top-ranked town of Bath marks its fourth consecutive year in the Top 10.

NORTH MISSES OUT

This year's Top 10 lacks representation from a number of regions, specifically the East Midlands, North West, North East, Wales, and Northern Ireland. However, several locations in the West Midlands saw notable improvements in their respective rankings since last year. Most notably, the Cathedral city of Worcester climbed a massive 21 places to eleventh, driven by strong scores for recent job growth and forecasted GVA.

Cardiff saw the most significant ranking increase from last year among the Welsh locations, climbing 10 places from last year to make 16th and reaching the top five in the Economy & Business pillar. Although this reflected improvements across many metrics, the Welsh capital stood out for its high score on job growth.

OPPORTUNITY INDEX

In addition to the Vitality Index, this report also includes a fourth annual update to the Opportunity Index. This standalone measure assesses each location's potential to overcome existing challenges, grow and improve. In contrast with the main index, the Opportunity Top 10 is much less focused on the South, and is instead dominated by locations in the North and the Midlands.

For a second successive year, the West Midlands town of Nuneaton sits at the top of the Opportunity ranking for 2024. Its grip on top spot reflects various government funding initiatives that are currently active in the town and its strong score for projected population growth in the 20-44 age category.

THE THREE PILLARS

ECONOMY & BUSINESS

RANK	TOWN / CITY	REGION	CHANGE
1	WATFORD	EAST	▲ 6
2	MANCHESTER	NORTH WEST	▼ 1
3	BASILDON	EAST	▲ 35
4	WORCESTER	WEST MIDLANDS	▲ 37
5	CARDIFF	WALES	▲ 15
6	HEMEL HEMPSTEAD	EAST	▼ 3
7	WOKING	SOUTH EAST	▲ 2
8	IPSWICH	EAST	▲ 33
9	CAMBRIDGE	EAST	▲ 6
10	MILTON KEYNES	SOUTH EAST	▼ 8

Economic and Business vitality is measured by wage growth, workforce jobs growth in specific sectors, new enterprises and business density, GVA per capita, GVA growth and forecast and commercial property investment volume per capita.

LIVING

RANK	TOWN / CITY	REGION	CHANGE
1	CAMBRIDGE	EAST	▲ 3
2	BATH	SOUTH WEST	▲ 3
3	SOLIHULL	WEST MIDLANDS	▲ 24
4	SALE	NORTH WEST	▲ 1
5	EDINBURGH	SCOTLAND	▲ 13
6	CHELTENHAM	SOUTH WEST	0
7	HIGH WYCOMBE	SOUTH EAST	0
8	OXFORD	SOUTH EAST	▲ 12
9	READING	SOUTH EAST	▲ 12
10	BRIGHTON & HOVE	SOUTH EAST	▼ 8

The Living pillar encompasses an analysis of education, lifestyle and consumption. It incorporates house price growth, GCSE results, NVQ4+ attainment, households in specific MOSAIC categories, comparison goods retail spend and retail vacancy rate.

HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

RANK	TOWN / CITY	REGION	CHANGE
1	WOKING	SOUTH EAST	0
2	HEMEL HEMPSTEAD	EAST	▲ 3
3	HIGH WYCOMBE	SOUTH EAST	0
4	WINDSOR & MAIDENHEAD	SOUTH EAST	0
5	MAIDSTONE	SOUTH EAST	▲ 14
6	NORTHAMPTON	EAST MIDLANDS	▲ 26
7	BATH	SOUTH WEST	▼ 5
8	COLCHESTER	EAST	▲ 5
9	MILTON KEYNES	SOUTH EAST	▲ 7
10	WATFORD	EAST	▼ 4

The Health and Environment pillar comprises cardiovascular mortality rate, life satisfaction, recycling rates, energy consumption per capita, CO2 emissions per capita, green space per capita and recorded crimes per capita.

DIGGING DEEPER

ECONOMY & BUSINESS

Four locations make their debut into the Top 10 this year, namely Cardiff, Ipswich, Basildon, and Worcester. The East of England region dominates, making up half of the pillar's Top 10 locations. Watford leads, securing the top position with strong scores across all indicators, while Ipswich and Basildon owe their high ranking to strong job growth. Cambridge returns to the Top 10 and ranks ninth this year, while Hemel Hempstead drops to sixth place.

Manchester is the sole representative from the northern regions and maintains its Top 10 status for a third consecutive year. The city performs strongly across all indicators and continues to demonstrate a strong economic profile. Worcester jumps from 41st last year to fourth place, a climb largely credited to strong performance on employment and forecasted GVA growth. Worcester is the only representative from the Midlands to feature in the Top 10.

Cardiff climbs from 19th last year to fifth, marking the first time a Welsh location has made the Top 10 on this pillar since the inception of Vitality Index. The rise was spurred by high scores across most indicators, with its only sub-par performance being relative levels of business density. Completing the Top 10, Woking and Milton Keynes stand as the representatives for South East England. Notably, Woking climbs two spots to seventh place, a rise credited to its improved wage growth score.

LIVING

Cambridge reclaimed top position on the Living pillar in 2024. It scores maximum points for its high share of affluent households and comparison goods retail spend, further reinforcing Cambridge's status as a leading UK location for high quality of life.

Bath, last year's top-ranked location on the main index, climbs three places to second on the Living pillar, reflecting robust scores across all constituent indicators. Cheltenham remains at sixth place and performs strongly in comparison goods retail spend, NVQ level 4+ and share of affluent households.

The South East region features prominently on the Living pillar, occupying the final four positions in this year's Top 10. Brighton & Hove drops to 10th from second, while Oxford and Reading re-enter the Top 10 after a year's absence, in eighth and ninth place respectively. Seventh-placed High Wycombe scores well on most indicators, its only weakness being its relatively high retail vacancy rate.

Solihull and Sale, positioned third and fourth respectively, are the only English locations to feature in the Top 10 outside of the South. Solihull climbed 24 places since last year, driven by stronger scores for comparison goods retail spend and house price growth. Edinburgh marks Scotland's return to the Top 10, securing fifth place on the Living pillar and climbing from 18th last year. Its rise is attributed to a high score for house price growth, a factor that weighed heavily on its performance last year.

HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

Woking takes the top spot a fourth successive year on the Health & Environment pillar, boasting good scores across all indicators and including the highest possible scores for low cardiovascular mortality and green space.

The South East continues its strong showing on this pillar with four other locations in the Top 10, namely High Wycombe, Windsor & Maidenhead, Maidstone, and Milton Keynes. In ninth place, Milton Keynes makes first appearance first Top 10, scoring well for low cardiovascular mortality, recycling rates and quantity of green space.

Hemel Hempstead moves up to second this year, performing strongly across all indicators and achieving a top score for quantity of green space. Colchester makes a return to the Top 10 in 2024 having missed the cut last year, displaying a significantly improved score in life satisfaction, while Watford falls to 10th due to a fall in its life satisfaction score.

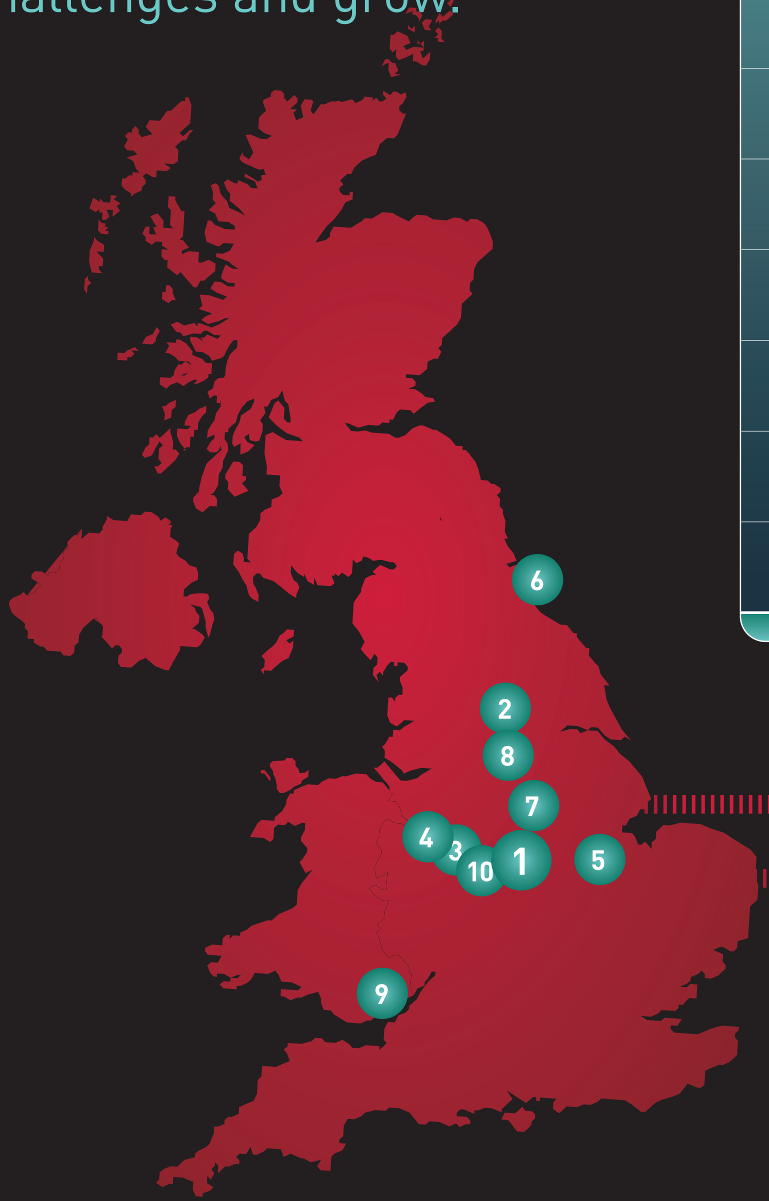
Meanwhile, Bath falls to seventh place having previously ranked in the top three for three consecutive years, partly been due to a lower life satisfaction score compared with previous years.

After experiencing an absence from the Top 10 for three years, the Midlands makes a notable comeback with Northampton, climbing from 32nd last year to sixth. This is largely thanks to significantly improved scores for recycling, CO2 emissions and crime rates.

OPPORTUNITIES

Now in its fourth year, the Opportunity Index is included in addition to the main index, putting a spotlight on those locations with the greatest potential to overcome current challenges and grow.

RANK	TOWN / CITY	REGION	CHANGE
1	NUNEATON	WEST MIDS	0
2	WAKEFIELD	YORKS & HUMBER	3
3	WOLVERHAMPTON	WEST MIDS	7
4	TELFORD	WEST MIDS	0
5	PETERBOROUGH	EAST OF ENGLAND	14
6	HARTLEPOOL	NORTH EAST	9
7	NOTTINGHAM	EAST MIDS	12
8	SHEFFIELD	YORKS & HUMBER	1
9	CARDIFF	WALES	2
10	BIRMINGHAM	WEST MIDS	6



WHAT'S IN IT?

The Opportunity Index encompasses an analysis of government funded support (Future High Street Fund, Towns Fund, Levelling Up Fund, City Region Deals and Enterprise Zones), forecasted population growth among 20-44 year olds, housing deliveries and future pipeline, and the ratio of retail to office stock. The last of these is indicative of opportunities to repurpose and regenerate.

NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE FLIPPED

The Opportunity ranking results are starkly different to the Vitality Index, reflecting the use of a distinct set of indicators on this measure. While the top locations for Vitality tend to be towns and cities in the South of England, the Top 10 for Opportunity is dominated by locations in the Midlands and Northern England.

NUNEATON STILL TOP OF THE OPPS

Nuneaton takes the top spot for a second successive year in 2024, having occupied the top two ever since the Opportunity Index was inaugurated in 2021. The Warwickshire town continues to achieve high scores across the board, benefitting from various government funding initiatives and performing strongly for projected population growth in the 20-44 age cohort.

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Despite having no representation in the Top 10 of the main index, Nuneaton is one of four West Midlands locations in the Opportunity Top 10 alongside Wolverhampton, Telford and Birmingham. Birmingham's entry into the Top 10 this year partly reflected the £20m award from round three of the government's Levelling Up Fund.

NORTHERN POTENTIAL

The North East is represented for the first time in this year's Top 10 with Hartlepool taking sixth place. The port town received £16m in round two of the government's Levelling Up Fund following a successful bid in the Towns Fund, and also gained a high score for its retail to office stock ratio. Yorkshire & the Humber also had two representatives in the Top 10, through Wakefield and Sheffield, with both scoring especially well for projected population growth.

RE-ENTRANTS

Two locations have returned to this year's Top 10, with Cardiff and Nottingham both returning to the fold for the first time since 2021. Meanwhile, Peterborough, in the East of England, makes its debut on the list. Each of these locations has benefitted from the government's Levelling Up Fund: Cardiff and Peterborough each received approximately £50m from the second round, while Nottingham recently obtained just under £20m from the Fund's third round.

NORTH WEST COMES CLOSE

While the North West was unrepresented in the Top 10 this year, three key locations narrowly missed out, namely Liverpool, Wigan, and Bolton. All three locations are receiving funding from the various government initiatives, while Wigan scored strongly for its retail to office stock ratio, Bolton for housing delivery, and Liverpool for projected population growth among 20-44 year olds.

HOW WE DID IT

This report utilises 23 datasets relating to the many different aspects of a town or city's vitality or future potential. 100 UK towns and cities are ranked according to each of the datasets.

The Vitality Index is informed by 18 of these datasets. This combination of demographics, educational attainment, business activity, economic output, affluence, sustainability and commercial property data provides a rounded view of each location's vitality.

To focus on particular aspects of these localities, we split the datasets into three thematic sub-indices, or 'pillars'. These sub-indices illustrate which locations are performing best in economy and business, are best places for living and which are the healthiest and greenest.

To create a score for each dataset, it is ranked and each location is given a decile ranked score from 1-10; the top 10% receiving a score of 10 and the bottom 10% a score of one. The decile rankings are summed across each pillar's datasets to create a pillar score for each location.

The overall Vitality Index score is a summation of each location's total score on the three pillars. This score is ranked from 1-100, to give locations their final position.

The Opportunity Index is a separate and distinct measure informed by five datasets similarly scored.

PILLAR/INDEX	DATASET	SOURCE
ECONOMY & BUSINESS	Wage growth	ONS, NISRA
	Workforce jobs growth	Experian
	New enterprises & business density	ONS
	GVA per capita & growth/forecast	Experian
	Commercial property investment	Lambert Smith Hampton
LIVING	House price growth	Land Registry, Registers of Scotland
	GCSE results	Department for Education, StatsWales, Scottish Government
	NVQ4+ qualification	ONS, NISRA
	Household classification	Experian
	Comparison goods retail spend	Experian
	Retail vacancy rates	Experian, Springboard
HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT	Cardiovascular mortality	British Heart Foundation
	Life satisfaction	ONS
	Household waste recycled	DEFRA, StatsWales, SEPA, DAERA
	Energy consumption	DBEIS
	Carbon dioxide emissions	DBEIS
	Crime rate	ONS, Scottish Government, PSNI
	Green space per capita	Property Data
OPPORTUNITY	Government funded support	UK Government
	Forecast population change 20-44 year olds	ONS
	Housing delivery	Planning Pipe
	Housing completions	Local Planning Authorities
	Retail:office ratio	VOA

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