



Breathing new life into Ely High Street

A research report by East Cambridgeshire Green Party
October 2014



Green Party

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1. Introduction

Ely High Street risks becoming a clone town, dominated by chain stores and hollowed out by a supermarket takeover. But towns similar to Ely have shown how to fight back and make the high street an attractive and vibrant centre of the community.

East Cambridgeshire Green Party is calling for urgent action. This report sets out measures we propose to support the High Street and ensure Ely has a thriving city centre long into the future.

In common with many high streets, Ely city centre is under real and sustained pressure. In the last two decades, the high street has lost significant trade to large edge-of-town supermarkets. More recently, the rise of Internet shopping has also hit the traditional role of the high street.

The economic crash of 2008 brought the impacts of this to a head, with many shops closing. What now remains is a high street blighted by limited diversity of shops and dominated by chains. Charity shops, lower-end clothing retailers and coffee shops are over-represented. Some units have remained empty for a considerable time.

It does not need to be like this. Ely is well placed to arrest the decline of its city centre and create a flourishing and unique centre for our community. The city's architecture, setting, location and some of our existing shops and markets give Ely much on which to build.

There are also many lessons Ely can learn from elsewhere in the country. East Cambridgeshire Green Party has undertaken comparative research looking at places around the country that are similar to Ely and have managed to stem the tide of closing shops and a supermarket takeover.

This report compares the make-up of shops in Ely with other selected towns. We have drawn on these findings to put together an action plan for our high street.

People want a great high street. Research shows that, across the country, nearly three quarters of those questioned said that they would visit the high street more often if it offered a range of shops, especially more specialist and independent retailers. Combining that with places to meet, socialise and enjoy Ely's beautiful setting would breathe new life into our city centre.



Ely market in full swing

The Green Party believes communities should have more power to keep jobs and money in the local economy. We need

policies and initiatives from national and local government to help this happen. Across the country, the Green Party is campaigning for measures to create vibrant local economies:

1. Using planning policy and the Sustainable Communities Act to ensure that high streets have the full range of local shops and services, allowing them to compete with edge-of-town developments.
2. Encouraging people to 'buy local' through better promotion and access to markets.

3. Make our towns and cities an attractive environment for local people and visitors, with green spaces and a good balance between people, cars and other transport.

4. Ensure local shops aren't disadvantaged by parking arrangements that give an unfair advantage to supermarkets.

5. Prevent chain stores taking over independent shops, and control the saturation of certain business types such as takeaways and betting shops.



*Oliver Cromwell's House & Ely
Tourist Information Centre*

2. What do people want from their high street?

Building a positive future for the high street is one of the most difficult issues facing towns up and down the country.

While online retailing, supermarkets and new edge-of-town developments have taken a big slice of trade from city centres, the majority of people still yearn for a vibrant high street with a good mix of shops and an appealing environment.

Research on high streets carried out by American Express suggested that in the last decade, the price of houses near town centres with a high percentage of independent traders has risen to be 17 per cent higher than in comparable areas with proportionally fewer independent shops.

Recent surveys have also found that over 70 per cent of those asked would shop locally more often if there was a greater choice of independent businesses (Live and Breathe Research).

The role of the high street is also changing, with the right balance of businesses and facilities very important. Up to 34 per cent of people say that they look to eat out on the high street, with a similar percentage not liking their high street because there are 'too many of the wrong sorts of shops' (Live and Breathe Research).

Independent shops are the most popular option to replace empty units on the high street. Nearly half of people would choose this option, compared with only 9 per cent favouring a convenience store from a big supermarket.

People also want to get more involved in the future of the high street. Nearly three-quarters of people believe they should play a role in helping to decide which shops and services appear on their local high street (Deloitte).

This research compares the make-up of Ely high street with places with which it shares important factors. The towns of Wells (Somerset), Ludlow (Shropshire) and Kenilworth (Warwickshire) have been selected because they have one or more significant factors in common with Ely. These factors include architecture, setting, transport connections, community space, promotion, and number and type of shops and businesses. That they have been successful in maintaining an attractive, diverse and well-visited high street offers lessons for Ely about the positive steps we need to help our high street flourish.

3. How does Ely compare with other places?

East Cambridgeshire Green Party compared a number of facets of the local economy. Some key comparisons are set out below.

Promotion and tourism

All the settlements looked at in the research rely to a degree on visitors as a source of income and support for high street shops. All undertake measures to promote themselves, and these are discussed and compared below.

Visitor numbers: Ely attracts significant numbers of visitors. Although East Cambridgeshire District Council has made no assessment of numbers in recent years, the most up-to-date figures from Visit England (2006-2009) show that Cambridgeshire attracted 1.9m domestic visitors during that period. This compares with 1.4m for Warwickshire, 1.2 for Shropshire and 3.5m for Somerset.

Although visits to Cambridgeshire are likely to be dominated by Cambridge itself, this does show the potential to increase visitor numbers to Ely

Investment in promotion: East Cambridgeshire District Council reported spending £16,148 on promoting the district in 2012/13, a fall of over 10 per cent from the previous year.

The materials and activities Ely offers include:

- Tourism website (plus Cathedral has its own website)
- Pages on Visit Cambridge website
- Tourist information centre out of town centre, co-housed with museum
- Festivals including folk music festival and the local Eel Festival

Ludlow (Shropshire):

Ludlow is a medieval market town. It has fine historic buildings and a strong community feel.

Ludlow has promoted itself as a centre for antiques and for food and drink. For the latter, it draws strongly on local producers and is a member of the Slow Food movement which works to promote the greater enjoyment of food through a better understanding of its taste, quality and production.

Promotion

- Tourism website (plus main attractions [e.g. Ludlow castle] have own websites)
- Pages on Shropshire tourism website
- Tourist information centre in centre of town
- Festivals including renowned food and arts weeks (promoted via own websites), and a Christmas Fayre



Kenilworth (Warwickshire):

Kenilworth is a market town in Warwickshire. Located close to Coventry, Leamington Spa and Warwick, it has a large commuter population.

It is an ancient settlement with relatively large numbers of well-preserved older buildings. Chief amongst these is the extensive remains of Kenilworth Castle. There are a number of green areas around the town, including the 70 acre Abbey Fields and riverside area. There has been recent investment in the town centre, including new shop developments. Kenilworth railway station is due to reopen in 2016, having been closed since the 1960s.



Promotion

- Tourism website (plus main attractions [e.g. Kenilworth Castle] have own website)
- Pages on Visit Warwickshire tourism website
- Tourist information centre on high street (co-housed with library)
- Market promoted via a basic website
- Annual festival aimed primarily at local community

Wells (Somerset):

Like Ely, Wells is a small cathedral city. It has an active and successful market and farmers' market, and its large number of historic buildings including the medieval cathedral make it a popular tourist destination.

Employment in Wells is in the service sector, with some residents commuting to Bath and Bristol (both about 20 miles away). Wells describes itself as the UK's first online high street and was one of the first places to join the MyHigh.St website for local independent retailers.



Promotion

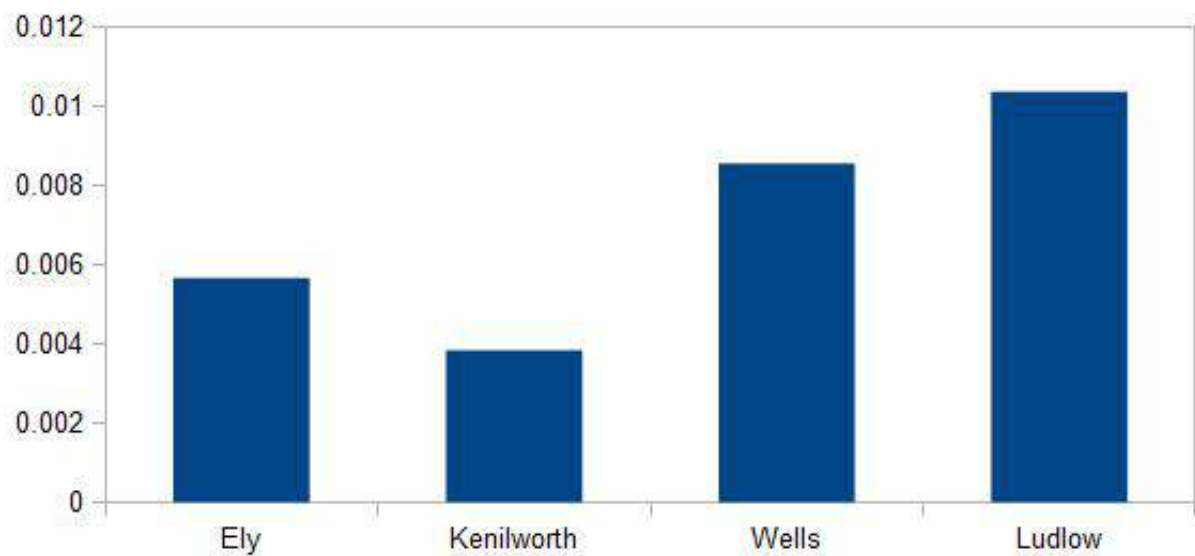
- Tourism website (plus main attractions [e.g. Wells Cathedral] have own website)
- Pages on Visit Somerset tourism website
- Tourist information adjacent to Cathedral in town centre and co-housed with museum
- One of seven places promoting independent shops via the 'my high street' website
- Festivals including well-known festival of literature. There are plans to re-establish a festival of food, which will run in 2014

Numbers of business premises:

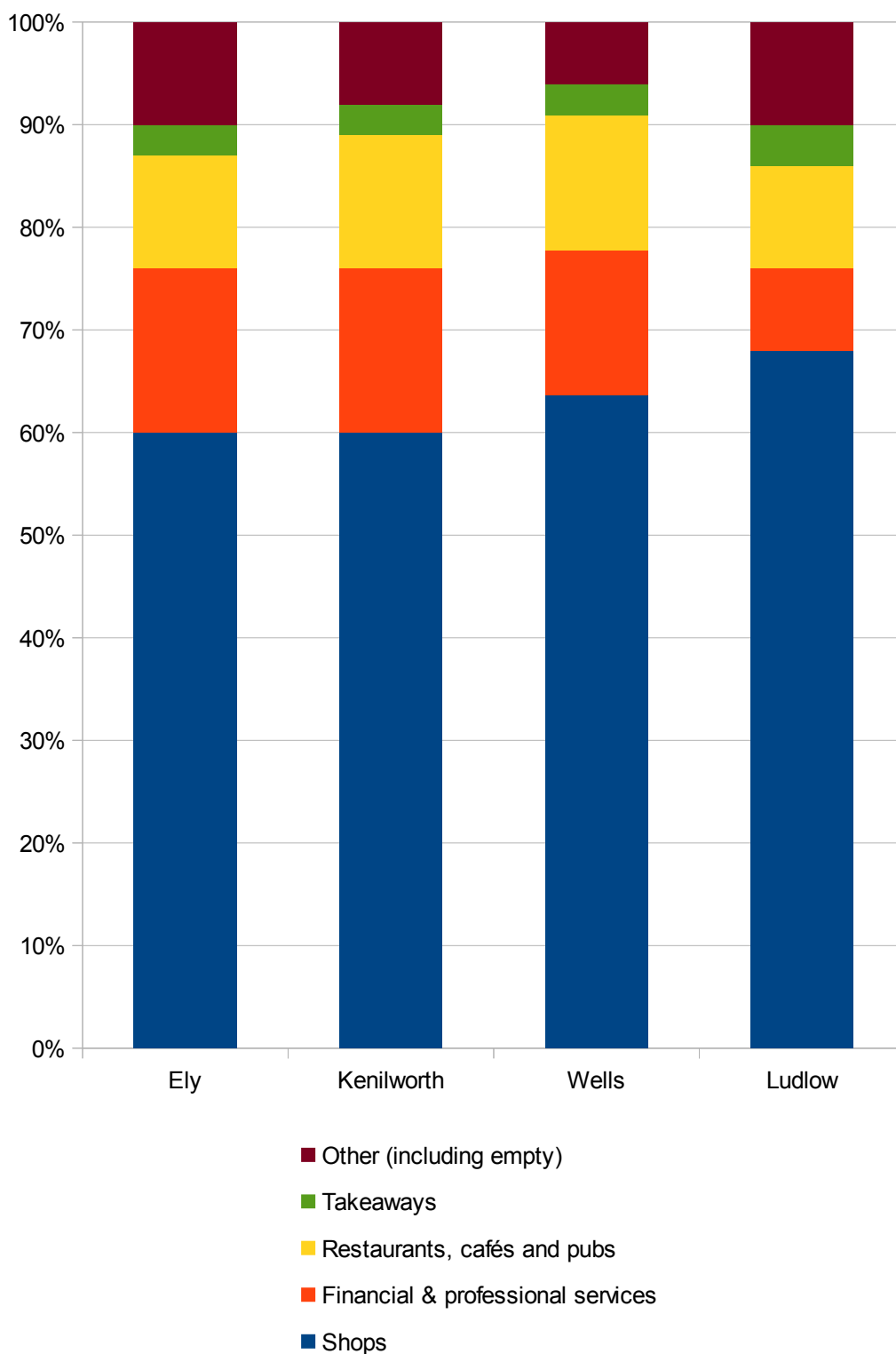
Ely has a smaller number of business premises in its city centre than two of the other three areas studied in the research. It is notable that Ely has a larger and faster-growing population than two of the three (Wells and Kenilworth).

Furthermore, Kenilworth, which has a lower number of shops, is taking action to address what it perceives as a weakness. A new shopping area has been constructed in Kenilworth directly adjacent to the high street.

Shops per head of population



Percentage of shops by type



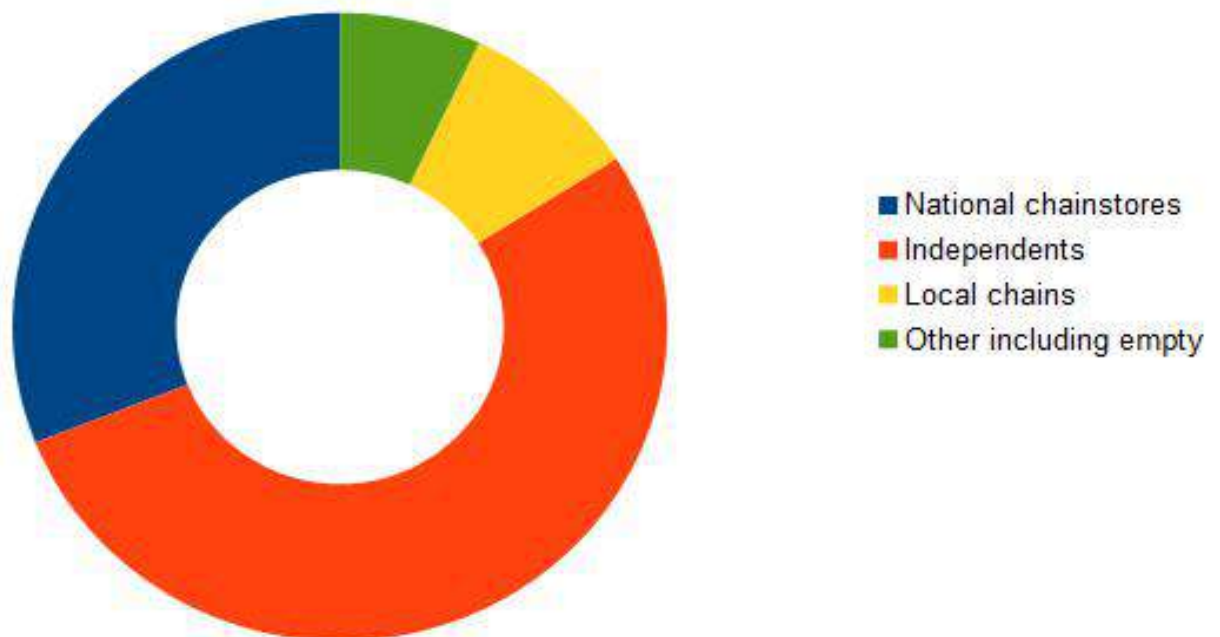
Businesses by type

The graph below shows the breakdown of key premises types for the four settlements.

Although the main types of business in the city centres are comparable, it is notable that Ely has the highest percentage of premises operating as businesses other than shops.

Businesses by ownership

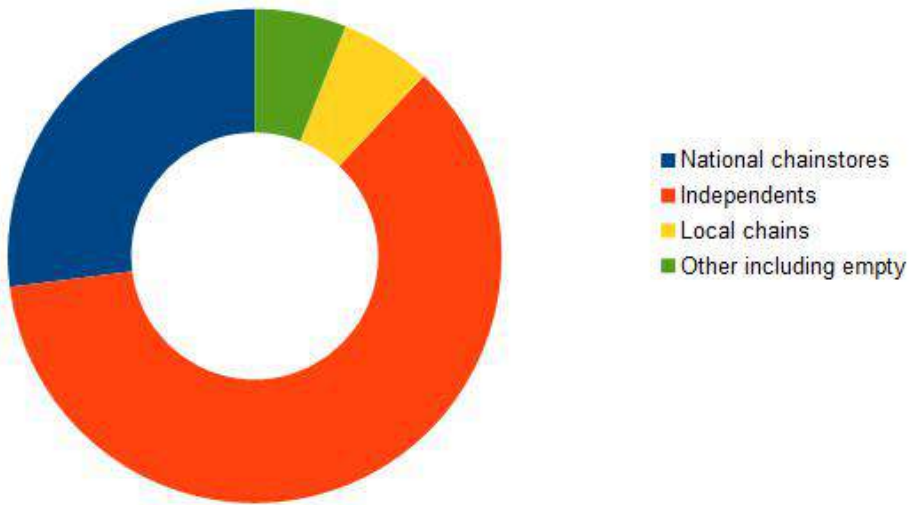
Ely: Business by ownership type



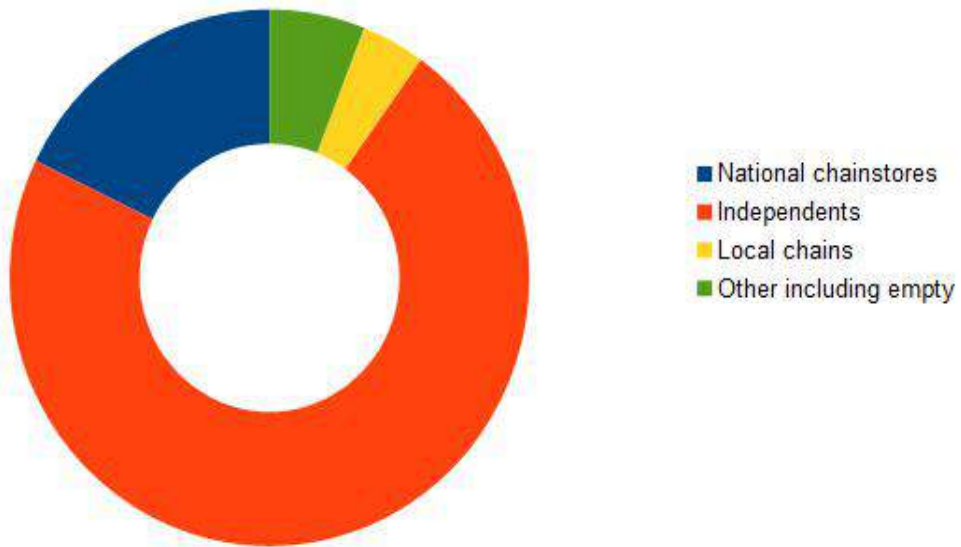
These charts compare the ownership of shops in the four settlements (Wells, Ludlow and Kenilworth are shown on the following page).

There is a significantly smaller percentage of independent shops in Ely compared with other towns in the survey. Local and national chains make up nearly half of the businesses in the city. In comparison, three-quarters of businesses in Ludlow are independent. In purely numerical terms, Ludlow has 40 more independent shops than Ely does. While concerns about the level of rents and business rates are not unique to Ely, these are clearly factors deterring independent traders from establishing themselves in the city.

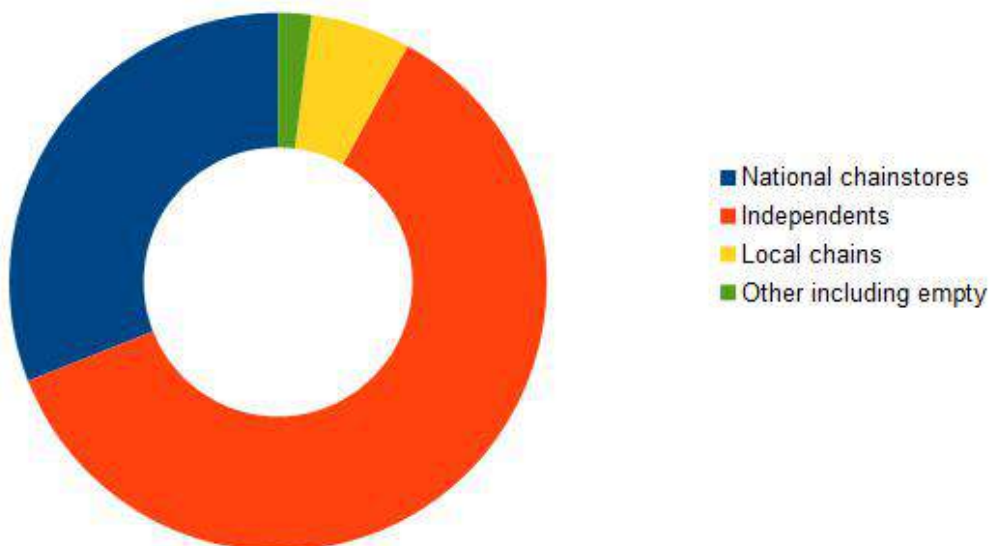
Wells: Business by ownership type



Ludlow: Business ownership by type

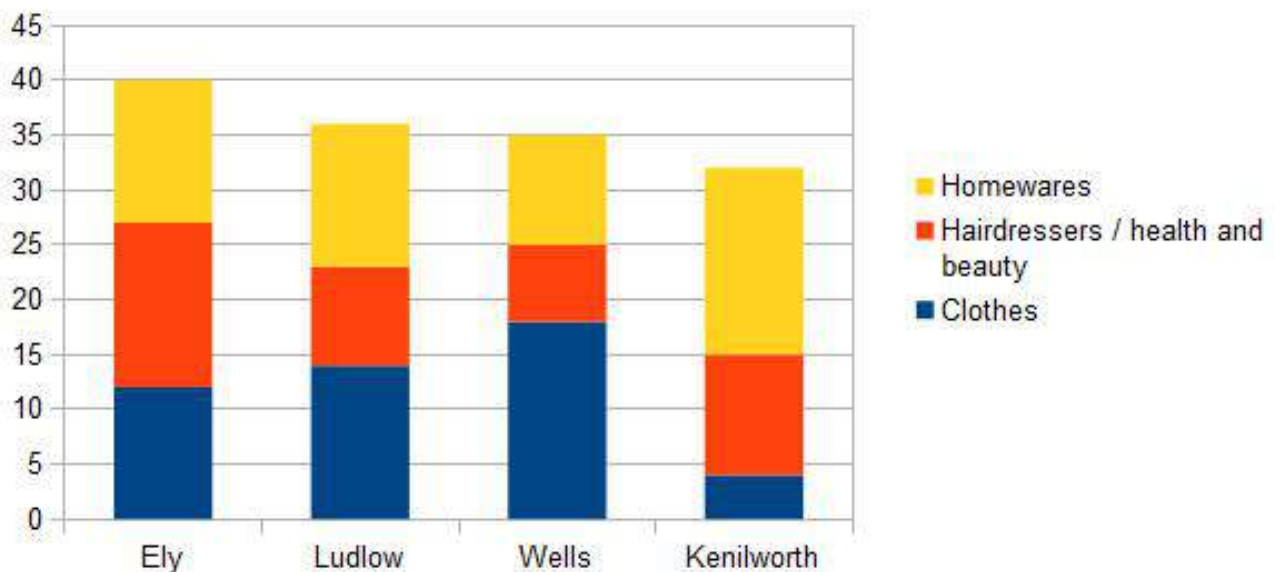


Kenilworth: Business ownership by type



Most common types of shop

Numbers of most common shop types



This graph shows the most common type of shops found in the four settlements.

Clothes shops, hairdressing / health and beauty, and homewares are the three biggest groups of shops on Ely high street. Between them, these type of shops make up nearly 40% of the total number of city centre outlets – a higher percentage than the other areas looked at, suggesting a lack of diversity in city centre shops.

4. What can Ely learn from similar places?

Build on existing strengths

- Key to improving the fortunes of Ely's high street is to attract more people in. Ely has an excellent array of social and cultural events which are the envy of many larger towns and could play a part in doing this. These are highly comparable with the other towns examined in the research.
- There is a case for using the successful farmers' market to support the development of an Ely food festival. The farmers' market itself could be supported via a permanent home on the high street.
- Ely could also be marketed as a centre for art, crafts and antiques. This would build on the annual Christmas Craft Fair at the Cathedral, regular craft fairs, art galleries, and establishments like Waterside Antiques and recently-opened shops selling handmade goods.

Improve physical environment

- Unlike other places looked at in the research, Ely is not situated in an area of protected landscape. It does, however, have the potential to be a green city. The Paradise Park, Cherry Hill Park and the riverside area provide attractive green spaces adjacent to the city centre. Improved management could encourage their use as access routes to the high street from the train station and major housing areas, as has been successfully

managed at Kenilworth.

- Measures to improve the physical environment of the high street, such as trialling a pedestrianisation of the high street on all market days, and measures to improve the setting and use of the market square including planting, benches and public art.

Improve online presence

- Follow the lead of towns such as Wells by helping to get high street independents online. The local authority could provide advice on creating an effective online presence, including SEO and social media. Combining online with storefront sales is a more sustainable and secure business model for specialist retailers.

Increase diversity on the high street

- The research makes clear that Ely city centre is dominated by a very limited number of shop types. Others, such as greengrocers, fishmongers and entertainment retailers are notable mainly by their absence. East Cambridgeshire district council should work with the local community to identify the kind of shops that the high street lacks, and seek out and give opportunities to those who can develop them.



*Independent shops -
Lifeblood of the high street*

Encourage sustainable access

- Physical links between the town centre and the train station are poor.
- While improving these links does form part of the medium to long-term plans for the areas around the train station, there is a strong case for prioritising the creation and promotion of a safe and attractive approach from the station to the high street and the cathedral.



Access point - Ely railway station

Make space for new shops and other facilities

- Research shows that in comparison with other smaller towns, Ely has a relatively small number of shop units. Rather than focusing on building space for big retailers on

the edge of the city, Ely should be pursuing a balanced strategy that also increases space.

Improve promotion

- Key to improving the fortunes of Ely's high street is to attract more people in. Although acknowledging the significant pressure on local authority finances, there is a strong case for increasing the amount spent on promoting Ely to domestic tourists in concert with other improvements set out above.



Ely's specialist shops

- Ely lacks a central means of promoting events and activities to local people and visitors. An obvious way of tackling this would be to move the tourist information centre to a more central position on the high street (prominent locations are available for this). Part of the cost of doing this could be mitigated by combining the new TI location with the new permanent relocation of the post office.



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