

West Lothian's high streets continue to be "go-to" destinations for local people

West Lothian's high streets continue to be "go-to" destinations for local people despite fears towns such as Bathgate are seeing businesses desert them.

Trading difficulties and anti-social behaviour have sparked fears among community groups and local councillors in recent months. But a study shows town centres in rude health compared to many other Scottish high streets.

Shop fronts in the five traditional burghs have an occupancy rate of more than 91 per cent – higher than the average Scottish high street.

A review by council retail advisers found small, independent businesses are still a prominent feature in all centres.

Livingston North councillor Andrew Miller pointed out that the street of shops in Deans was all occupied by takeaway food businesses. "Do we have information on what the current mix is in the five burghs?"

Stewart Ness of the council's Town Centre Management team told the meeting of the Economy Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel that he and colleagues conduct quarterly surveys of occupancy in the traditional high streets as well as recording the types of businesses occupying stores.

The five burghs; Armadale, Bathgate, Broxburn, Linlithgow and Whitburn, all remain “vibrant” with occupancy of commercial property of 91.6 per cent for 2023/24. Occupancy has averaged 90% every year since 2017.

Mr Ness said: “To give these numbers context. The average Scottish vacancy rate across this period is about 15% so West Lothian high streets have and continue to perform very well when benchmarked against the national average.”

In his report to the panel, Mr Ness added: “Consumer habits have changed, and service providers that can’t trade online, like personal services and food and drink, will continue to increase presence in our town centres.

“This has led to a perceived concern amongst the public around a lack of choice and/or concentration of certain types of businesses.”

He added: “Change is constant and with the continued growth of online and other ‘non-bricks and mortar’ shopping, our traditional high streets are no longer a destination for retail only.”

Pop up shops which offer short term trading are a potential answer for the hard to let units in all towns. Council officers are working to identify sites and consider approaches as to how to encourage permanent or temporary uses.

Chairing the meeting, Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan said: “I’m really pleased to see that there’s work to consider how we can bring stalled sites back into productive use, particularly pop-up shops which can showcase businesses that were maybe set up online during the pandemic and that are unsure about making transition and test the market. I look forward to seeing how work progresses.”

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter