



# UK 2023 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 2023 UK Vitality Index, LSH's tenth annual assessment of 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 which are 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.

This year's ranking has been enhanced with the addition of a new indicator of green space per capita to the Living pillar.

For the third year running, a separate Opportunity Index is also included. This identifies the locations with the greatest potential to overcome existing challenges and grow.

The Vitality Index covers the 100 largest towns and cities by population outside London. Each of these places has had its strengths and weaknesses thoroughly tested by pandemic and, more recently, the cost-of-living crisis. Further challenges will undoubtedly be ahead in 2023.

Despite an uncertain backdrop, many locations have seen improvements across a host of indicators over the last year. This report shines a light on every location's relative resilience and provides insight into their potential for growth in an ever-changing world.

# HEADLINES

## 2023 TOP TEN

- 1 BATH
- 2 WOKING
- 3 WATFORD
- 4 WINDSOR & MAIDENHEAD
- 5 HIGH WYCOMBE
- 6 MILTON KEYNES
- 7 HEMEL HEMPSTEAD
- 8 CAMBRIDGE
- 9 CHELTENHAM
- 10 BOURNEMOUTH/POOLE



**BATH IS THE TOP RANKED LOCATION FOR VITALITY**

**WATFORD MAKES ITS TOP 10 DEBUT**

**SOUTHERN ENGLAND DOMINATES THE RANKING**

**HEMEL HEMPSTEAD IS THE TOP 10'S HIGHEST RISER**

**MANCHESTER IS TOP FOR ECONOMY & BUSINESS**

**YORK RANKS HIGHEST FOR LIVING**

# KEY FINDINGS

## HOT BATH

Bath is the highest ranked of the UK's 100 largest urban areas in the 2023 Vitality Index, taking the crown from last year's top location, Windsor & Maidenhead. Bath has featured in the Top 10 of the overall ranking for four years running, and it regains a title that it last held in 2020.

Bath's victory is drawn from consistently strong scores across all three of the ranking's pillars. The historic city has a Top 5 placement in two pillars – Health & Environment and Living; but even its weakest pillar, Economy & Business, sees it achieve a Top 20 ranking.

## WOKING ON SUNSHINE

Following closely in second place is Woking, which has a Top 3 overall position for the third consecutive year. Woking's strongest area is the Health & Environment pillar, which it tops for the second year in a row, on the back of high scores for measures of Health & Wellbeing, as well as the newly introduced green spaces indicator.

Third place goes to Watford, which leaps into the Top 10 for the first time in the history of the Vitality Index. Notably, Watford is the only location to achieve a Top 10 placement in all three of the pillars.

## THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH

While locations in the south of England always feature at the higher end of the Vitality Index, this year's Top 10 is unusually concentrated on this part of the UK. All ten

places are filled by just three regions – the South East, South West and East of England. For the first time since the inaugural report ten years ago, the overall Top 10 has no representatives from either Scotland or the north of England.

Locations in close proximity to London are particularly prominent at the top end of the ranking this year. Alongside Woking and Watford, strong placings are also achieved by Hemel Hempstead and High Wycombe.

Watford and Hemel Hempstead are the two biggest movers up the ranking in the Top 10, both powered by strong improvements in the Economy & Business indicators. This provides evidence that changes in work-life patterns caused by the pandemic have delivered an economic boon to satellite towns.

## VIBRANT LOCATIONS

At sixth, Milton Keynes re-enters the Top 10 after a four-year absence, with improved scores across all three pillars. In eighth, Cambridge maintains a proud record as the only city to remain ever-present in the Top 10 since the Vitality Index's inauguration, but it slips down sharply from second place last year.

Ninth-placed Cheltenham features in the Top 10 for the fourth straight year, but it drops down from fifth in 2022, with a weaker performance in all three pillars. Meanwhile, Bournemouth/Poole takes the final Top 10 place, matching its best-ever previous ranking.

## NORTHERN LIGHTS

While the south dominates the higher reaches of the Vitality Index, several northern locations are bubbling under just outside the Top 10. Sale and Stockport only narrowly miss out on a Top 10 placing, with both scoring particularly highly in the Living pillar; while Warrington is also in the overall Top 20, boosted by strong Economy & Business indicators.

Edinburgh, which was sixth in 2022 and regularly features in the Top 10, is one of the biggest fallers in the ranking, dropping to 21st. Unusually, the city achieves the lowest scores possible for wage growth and house price growth this year. Nonetheless, it is still the highest-ranked non-English location and ahead of the other national capitals, Cardiff and Belfast.

## OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

In addition to the Vitality Index, this report also includes a forward-looking 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 towns and cities in the North West, the Midlands and Yorkshire.

Nuneaton comes top of the Opportunity ranking for 2023. This is largely due to it benefitting from various government funds, in addition to strong projected population growth for 20-44 year olds

# THE THREE PILLARS



## ECONOMY & BUSINESS

RANK	TOWN / CITY	REGION
1	MANCHESTER	NORTH WEST
2	MILTON KEYNES	SOUTH EAST
3	HEMEL HEMPSTEAD	EAST
4	SALFORD	NORTH WEST
5	READING	SOUTH EAST
6	CRAWLEY	SOUTH EAST
7	WATFORD	EAST
8	PRESTON	NORTH WEST
9	WOKING	SOUTH EAST
10	WARRINGTON	NORTH WEST

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
1	YORK	YORKS & HUMBER
2	BRIGHTON & HOVE	SOUTH EAST
3	SALE	NORTH WEST
4	CAMBRIDGE	EAST
5	BATH	SOUTH WEST
6	CHELTENHAM	SOUTH WEST
7	HIGH WYCOMBE	SOUTH EAST
8	WORTHING	SOUTH EAST
9	BOURNEMOUTH/POOLE	SOUTH WEST
10	WATFORD	EAST

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
1	WOKING	SOUTH EAST
2	BATH	SOUTH WEST
3	WYCOMBE	SOUTH EAST
4	WINDSOR & MAIDENHEAD	SOUTH EAST
5	HEMEL HEMPSTEAD	EAST
6	WATFORD	EAST
7	BEDFORD	EAST
8	OXFORD	SOUTH EAST
9	CHELMSFORD	EAST
10	WORTHING	SOUTH EAST

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

The Top 10 in this pillar includes more locations outside the south of England than the other two, with four towns and cities representing the North West. These include Manchester, which tops the pillar for the second successive year. The city performs strongly across the indicators, achieving top scores for jobs growth, new enterprises, GVA growth and commercial property investment.

The neighbouring city of Salford also features highly, in fourth place, with its performance boosted by a vibrant media sector. The North West's other representatives in the Top 10 are Preston and Warrington.

As one of the UK's fastest growing cities, Milton Keynes consistently features in the Top 10 of this pillar, and it moves up from fifth to second place this year. Its highest scores are for GVA per capita and commercial property investment.

The other South East locations in the Top 10 are Reading, Crawley and Woking. Crawley's sixth place is particularly impressive as it languished in the lower reaches of the Top 100 last year. The town was hard hit during the pandemic, due to the importance of Gatwick Airport to the local economy, but its vastly improved ranking attests to a recovering aviation sector.

Completing the Top 10 in this pillar, Hemel Hempstead and Watford provide East of England representation.

## LIVING

Living provides Yorkshire & The Humber's only Top 10 placement in any of the three pillars, with York moving up three places to take top spot. The cathedral city performs well across the indicators, with its highest scores being for house price growth and educational achievement.

Brighton & Hove is second in this pillar, achieving maximum points for NVQ level 4+ attainment and affluent households. High Wycombe and Worthing also have high placements, with both towns boosted by strong scores for comparison goods retail spend. However, fewer South East locations feature in the Top 10 of this pillar than the other two, partly due to relatively low house price growth across the region since the pandemic.

Sale provides the North West with a representative in the Top 10, with a third place ranking for the second year running. The Greater Manchester town's high position is driven by strong scores for educational achievement and affluent households.

Cambridge takes fourth place, with only a low score for house price growth preventing a higher placement. The East of England is also represented by Watford in tenth.

Three South West locations complete the Top 10, with Bath, Cheltenham and Bournemouth/Poole all scoring consistently well in this pillar.

## HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

The Top 10 of this pillar is the least geographically varied, with only three regions represented – namely, the South East, South West and East of England.

Top place goes to Woking for the second successive year. Scoring well across the pillar's indicators, the Surrey town's highest rankings are for cardiovascular mortality, life satisfaction and recycling rates.

A further four South East locations – High Wycombe, Windsor & Maidenhead, Oxford and Worthing – are all in the Top 10. Windsor & Maidenhead is a notable beneficiary of the introduction of a green space indicator in this year's report, achieving a maximum score for this measure.

Second place is taken by Bath, with Health & Environment being the strongest individual pillar for the winner of this year's overall ranking. Bath scores highly on measures of health and wellbeing, with low cardiovascular mortality and high life satisfaction. However, no other South West locations feature in the Top 10.

In contrast, the East of England is heavily represented, with four locations achieving Top 10 placements. The highest of these is Hemel Hempstead in fifth place, with its strongest scores coming from green space per capita, cardiovascular mortality and recycling rates. Watford, Bedford and Chelmsford are the region's other entrants in the Top 10.

# OPPORTUNITIES

For the third year running, 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
1	<b>NUNEATON</b>	WEST MIDS
2	ST HELENS	NORTH WEST
3	WIGAN	NORTH WEST
4	TELFORD	WEST MIDS
5	WAKEFIELD	YORKS & HUMBER
6	PLYMOUTH	SOUTH WEST
7	SHEFFIELD	YORKS & HUMBER
8	LINCOLN	EAST MIDS
9	LIVERPOOL	NORTH WEST
10	WOLVERHAMPTON	WEST MIDS



## 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 REVERSED

The Opportunity ranking results are starkly different to the Vitality Index, drawing on a distinct set of indicators. While the top locations for Vitality are mostly towns and cities in the south of England, the Top 10 for Opportunity is dominated by locations in the North West, the Midlands and Yorkshire. None of the towns and cities listed in the Top 10 of the Opportunity Index appear in any of the Vitality Index's pillar Top 10s.

## NONE ABOVE NUNEATON

Top place in this year's Opportunity Ranking is taken by Nuneaton, which moves up one place from 2022. The Warwickshire town achieves top scores for population growth forecasts for 20-44 year olds and government funding, having made successful bids to both the Future High Streets Fund and Towns Fund.

## LEVELLING UP BOOST

Nuneaton is one of three West Midlands locations in the Top 10, alongside Telford and Wolverhampton. The ranking of Telford is boosted by the recent award of £20m from round two of the government's Levelling Up Fund. The same amount was also awarded to Lincoln, helping it to become the only East Midlands location in the Top 10.

## HIT THE NORTH

The North West features heavily in the Top 10 with St Helens, Wigan and Liverpool all included. St Helens and Wigan are consistent scorers across the Opportunity metrics, while Liverpool receives a particular boost from strong population growth forecasts for 20-44 year olds. Population forecasts are also a major factor behind Yorkshire's two representatives in the Top 10, Sheffield and Wakefield, which both receive a maximum score for this indicator.

## ODD ONE OUT

Plymouth is the 'odd one out' in the Top 10, being the only southern location. The South West city is home to multiple regeneration projects and scores highly for both government funding and housing delivery. No South East, East of England or North East locations are included in the Top 10 but, at a regional level, the North East has an above-average Opportunity score.

## OPPORTUNITY IN THE NATIONS

While the Top 10 is purely comprised of locations in England, other parts of the UK also rank highly for Opportunity. The average score for locations in Scotland is the highest of any region covered by the report, and Edinburgh and Dundee only narrowly miss out on Top 10 placements. Likewise, Cardiff is just outside the Top 10 and Wales has one of the highest average scores for Opportunity.

# 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, health, environment 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, which are the best places to live, 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 1. 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
<b>ECONOMY &amp; BUSINESS</b>	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
<b>LIVING</b>	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
<b>HEALTH &amp; ENVIRONMENT</b>	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
<b>OPPORTUNITY</b>	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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