Sample Market Opportunity Report

A real example of the £1,280 report. The market: opticians in the UK. The question: is there room for an independent optician to open or buy a second practice, and where? Every figure comes from an official source or a public page we opened, with the date.

320

fewer optician premises in the UK in 2026 than in 2019, while the number of people aged 65 and over keeps rising. Older, rural and coastal counties have far fewer premises for each older resident than the rest of the UK. That gap is what this report is about.

Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS), UK Business Counts, read on 9 November 2026. Nobody ordered this sample. It is shorter than a paid report. Updated 10 November 2026 to correct how Specsavers stores are counted by area (see section 6).

Order your report: £1,280 | What the report includes

For UK businesses only. By ordering you agree to our terms and conditions. Prices in pounds, no VAT added.

1. Summary: is the opportunity real?

Is the opportunity real? Yes, but only in some places and not on price. The gap is in older, rural and coastal counties, and in services the big chains do not sell cheaply.

7,195
optician premises in the UK in 2026, down from 7,515 in 2019

3 in 4
premises employ fewer than 10 people

36 v 50
premises per 100,000 people aged 65 and over: South West against the rest of the UK (see section 6)

£45 v £25
eye test price: middle of five independents we checked, against the largest chain

Three findings a buyer should act on:

- The places with the oldest populations have the fewest optician premises for each older resident. Cornwall, East Sussex, Norfolk, Somerset and Lincolnshire have between half and two thirds as many as the rest of the UK.
- Do not compete on the price of an eye test. Five large national chains charge £25 to £30. The NHS pays a practice £24.13 for the same test in England. There is no margin left to undercut.
- Independents that publish their prices sell something different: longer appointments, a monthly care plan, and extra services such as children's short-sight care, dry eye clinics and ear wax removal. That is where the money and the loyalty are.

The rest of this report shows the evidence for each point, where it is weak, and what we would check before signing a lease.

2. Market overview and how it works

An optician's practice does two jobs. It tests eyes, which is health care. It sells glasses and contact lenses, which is retail. Most of the profit comes from the second job. The eye test brings people through the door.

- **Who pays for the test.** In Scotland, NHS-funded eye examinations are free for everyone. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the NHS pays for children, people aged 60 and over, and some other groups. Everyone else pays the practice directly.
- **What the NHS pays.** In England the NHS sight test fee for 2025/26 is £24.13, a rise of 60p. Trade bodies say this does not cover the cost of the test. A survey for the trade's negotiating committee, reported in August 2026, found that nine in ten of the 3,516 England contractors who answered had delayed hiring.
- **NHS vouchers.** People who qualify get a voucher towards glasses. Values run from £42.40 to £233.56 and were held at the April 2024 level from April 2025.

- **Who is allowed to test.** Only a registered optometrist can test sight. The regulator is the General Optical Council (GOC). In July 2025 it asked for the law to change so that every optical business is regulated, not just some. Parliament has to act first. We found no date for that.

How it is changing. Practices are taking on work that used to go to hospital eye departments, and adding services beyond glasses. Larger groups are buying independents. The owner of Boots agreed to sell the whole business, opticians included, in October 2026.

3. Industry statistics, with sources and dates

These are the official counts. Each has its source and date. Where we could not confirm a figure, we say so.



Optician premises in the UK, selected years. ONS UK Business Counts, industry code 47782 (retail sale by opticians), counted in March each year and rounded to the nearest 5. Read on 9 November 2026.

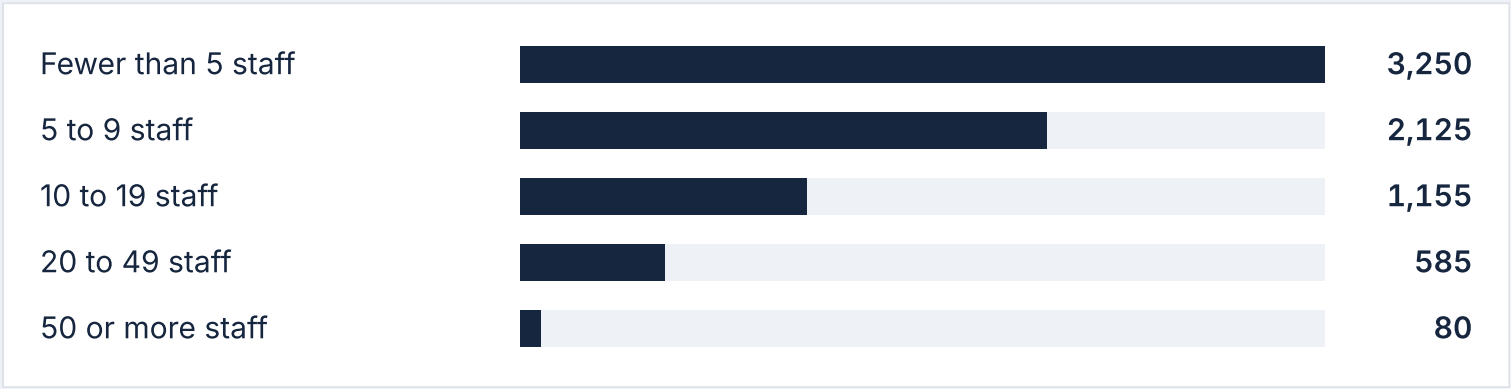
Measure	Figure	Date	Source
Optician premises, UK	7,195 (7,515 in 2019)	March 2026	ONS UK Business Counts
Optician businesses, UK	5,115 (5,190 in 2019)	March 2026	ONS UK Business Counts
Registered optometrists	18,725 (16,932 in 2022)	31 March 2025	General Optical Council annual report
Registered dispensing opticians	6,805 (7,060 in 2022)	31 March 2025	General Optical Council annual report
Registered optical businesses	2,934 (2,861 in 2022)	31 March 2025	General Optical Council annual report
NHS eye examinations, Scotland	About 2.54 million, up 4.4% in a year	2025/26	Public Health Scotland
NHS eye examinations, Wales	More than 910,000, up 5.1% in a year	April 2025 to March 2026	Welsh Government
NHS sight tests, Northern Ireland	476,613, the highest on record	2025/26	Business Services Organisation
NHS sight tests, England	Not confirmed		The NHS data page carries a notice about a possible data issue. We did not use it.
People aged 65 and over, UK	13.46 million, 19.4% of the population	Mid-2025	ONS population estimates
People who say they wear glasses	78% of UK adults asked	Early 2026, 2,014 people	General Optical Council public research
Had a sight test in the last two years	84%, up from 80% a year earlier	Early 2026	General Optical Council public research

What this tells us. More tests are being done in every nation we could confirm. More optometrists are registered. But there are fewer premises and fewer dispensing opticians. The work is moving into fewer, busier sites.

What it does not tell us. A fall of 320 premises is about 4%. The counts are rounded and taken from a business register, so a merger or a change of address can move a number without a shop closing. Treat the direction as real and the exact figure as approximate.

4. Market make-up: size, type and location of firms

Most optician premises are small. Three in four employ fewer than 10 people. Only about 80 in the UK employ 50 or more.



Optician premises in the UK by number of staff, March 2026. ONS UK Business Counts. Rounded, so bands do not add up exactly to 7,195.

The names on the high street are a small number of large groups, plus thousands of independents. These are the groups' own figures or dated press reports, not our estimates.

Group	What we could confirm	How it is owned	Date read
Specsavers	More than 1,200 businesses in the UK, including hearing. Group sales of £4.3bn	Each store is a joint venture with the local optician or audiologist	Press report, August 2026. Own site, 9 Nov 2026
Vision Express	Over 550 stores across the UK and Ireland	Part of EssilorLuxottica, the lens and frame maker	Own site, 9 Nov 2026
Boots Opticians	Store count not confirmed from the company	Boots agreed in October 2026 to be sold to Wittington Investments. Not yet complete	News report, 7 Oct 2026
Asda Opticians	Refitting 18 optical stores in a £2.5m plan for 2026	Part of Asda	Asda newsroom, February 2026
Hakim Group	121 practices at the end of 2024, up from 75. Works with more than 500 independent practices in the UK and Ireland	Backed by the investor ICG since May 2025. Practices keep their own names	Trade press and investor statement
Optical Express, Scrivens, Leightons, Bayfields	Current store counts not confirmed		Left out, not guessed

What we could not confirm. We found no free, dated figure in pounds for the size of the whole UK market from an official source, and no confirmed split between chains and independents. Paid market reports quote both. We did not use figures we could not open and check.

5. Competitor landscape: who gets named and found

We already test who AI search tools name when people ask for an optician. On 8 November 2026 we asked one AI search tool nine questions across six UK cities.

Question asked	Times asked	Names shown	National chains	Design-led brands	Independents
“Recommend a good optician in...”	6	33	0	8	25
“Where can I get an eye test in...”	3	22	8	3	11

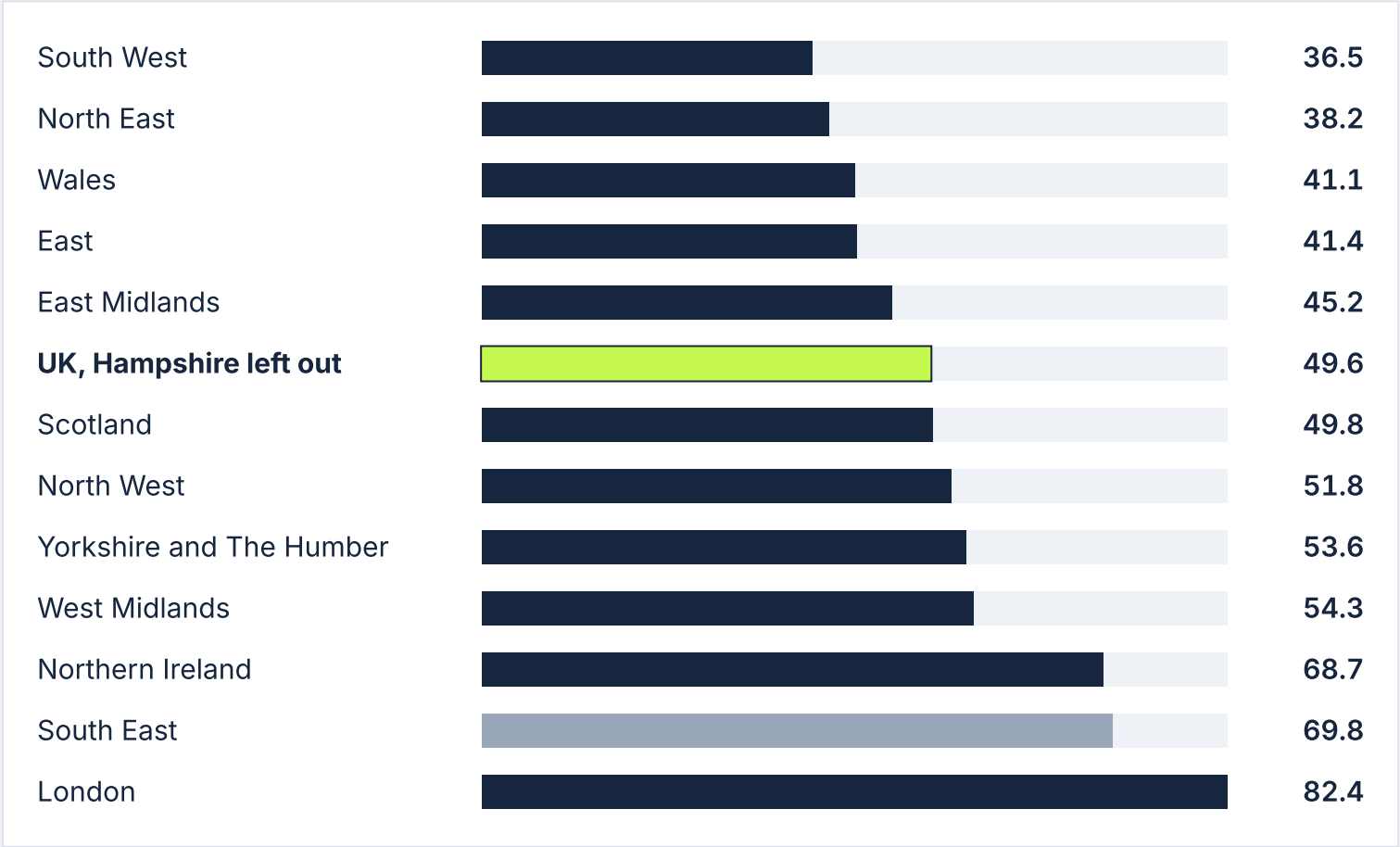
We call this **the quality-word switch**. Add a word like “good” and the answer moves from the big chains to independents. Ask a plain “where can I” question and the chains come back.

For a buyer this matters in two ways. An independent can be found by people who ask for quality, without outspending a chain on adverts. And a new practice with no reviews and no local write-ups will not be named at all, so the first year needs a plan for both.

Source: Whito study: ask AI for a good optician and the chains disappear. A small pilot: nine questions on one day. A paid report repeats the test in the towns you choose.

6. Geographic opportunities

We divided the number of optician premises in each area by the number of people aged 65 and over who live there. Older people need the most eye care, so this is a fair first test of where supply is thin.



Optician premises per 100,000 people aged 65 and over, 2026. Premises: ONS UK Business Counts, March 2026. People: ONS mid-2025 estimates. Ratio worked out by Whito. The South East bar is grey because it is distorted, and the UK bar leaves out Hampshire for the same reason. See below.

One number here is wrong, and we can show why. ONS records 685 optician premises in Hampshire. That is more than Kent, Surrey, Essex and Hertfordshire put together. Specsavers sets up each store as its own company, registered at its head office in Hampshire. We checked the store companies for Truro, Norwich and Taunton at Companies House on 10 November 2026: all three are registered there. So a large

share of Specsavers stores are counted in Hampshire, not where they trade. That has three effects. The South East looks high: without Hampshire it falls to 42. Every other area is missing many of its Specsavers stores, so we compare areas with the rest of the UK without Hampshire (50), not the full UK figure (54). And area counts cannot show whether local premises opened or closed over time, because a new Specsavers store adds to Hampshire, not to the town it opens in.

Below region level, the pattern is clear. These are the ten county and council areas with the fewest premises for each older resident, among areas with at least 30 premises.

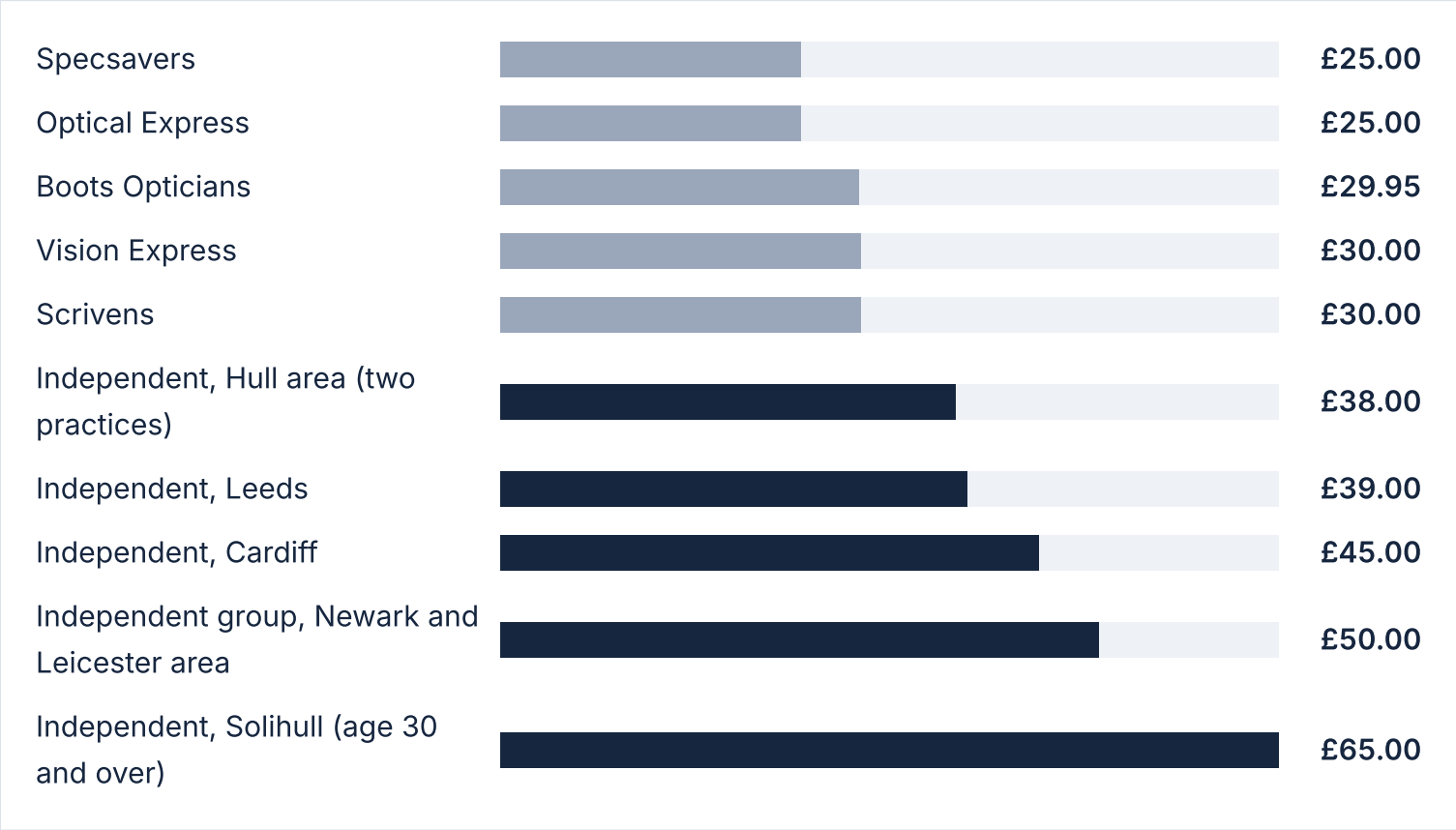
Area	Premises 2026	People aged 65+	Share of people aged 65+	Premises per 100,000 aged 65+
Cornwall	40	154,714	26.5%	**25.9**
East Sussex	40	152,307	27.1%	**26.3**
Norfolk	70	239,700	25.4%	**29.2**
Somerset	45	152,914	25.9%	**29.4**
East Riding of Yorkshire	30	99,256	27.5%	**30.2**
Lincolnshire	60	195,402	24.6%	**30.7**
Dorset	40	121,959	31.2%	**32.8**
Devon	75	226,786	26.8%	**33.1**
Shropshire	30	90,151	27.1%	**33.3**
Staffordshire	70	208,682	22.9%	**33.5**

In these areas between 23% and 31% of residents are 65 or over. The UK figure is 19.4%.

How to read it. Fewer premises does not prove unmet demand. People in rural counties travel to a market town, and some are seen at home. Rounding to the nearest 5 matters when a county has 40 premises. But the same pattern shows across ten separate areas, each at roughly half to two thirds the rate of the rest of the UK. A gap that size is unlikely to come from rounding alone. It is worth a closer look, town by town.

7. Customer and price trends

We read the published price of a private eye test for an adult on each firm’s own website on 9 November 2026. A second check re-opened every page.



Published price of a private adult eye test, 9 November 2026. Grey bars are national chains. Dark bars are independents, named by area only. The NHS pays practices in England £24.13 for a sight test.

Chain	What the site says
Specsavers	£25. A 3D eye scan costs up to £10 more
Optical Express	£25 essential, £50 advanced with 3D scan
Boots Opticians	From £29.95, varies by area
Vision Express	£30, 3D scan included
Scrivens	£30
Leightons	£39, £69 or £99 depending on the test
Cubitts	£50, or £75 with a 3D scan

The gap. The five national chains sit between £25 and £30. The five independents we double-checked sit between £38 and £65, with £45 in the middle. Smaller groups such as Leightons and Cubitts price like independents. Five independents is a small sample and we chose firms that publish a price, so read this as an example, not an average.

What independents sell instead. These are published prices we opened and re-checked.

Service	Published prices found	Why it matters
Monthly eye care plan	£8, £12 and £15 a month across four firms	Steady income each month and a reason to come back
Longer eye test	One independent lists a 40-minute private test at £39 beside its 20-minute NHS test	Time is the thing chains ration
Children's short-sight care	One practice: from £32 a month, 18-month minimum. One chain lists the special lenses at £360	A long relationship with a family, not a single sale
Ear wax removal	£55, £60 and £70 at three chains	Chains already sell this, so it is expected, not special
3D eye scan	Included in the £30 test at one chain, up to £10 extra at another	Easy to explain and easy to price

Customer signals. In the regulator's 2026 research, one in five people in the most deprived areas had not had a sight test in two years. Of people who had not been tested recently, 24% gave the cost of glasses or contact lenses as the reason. Price worry is about the glasses, not the test.

8. Gaps, risks and recommendations

Where the opportunity looks real

- Market towns in Cornwall, Somerset, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and East Sussex where the nearest practice is a long drive and the population is old and growing.
- Buying a practice from a retiring owner in those areas, not opening cold. An existing practice comes with patients and an NHS contract.
- A monthly plan from day one. Published plans at £8 to £15 a month show customers accept it.
- Being findable for “good optician” questions, where independents are already the ones named.

Where it does not

- Competing with a chain on the price of an eye test or a second pair of glasses.
- Large cities. London has 82 premises per 100,000 older residents against 37 in the South West.
- Relying on NHS test fees alone. The fee rose 60p for 2025/26 and nine in ten contractors who answered a trade survey had put off hiring.

What a sceptic would say, and our answer

Objection	Our answer
“If nobody is there, there is a reason. Thin footfall and no optometrists to hire.”	Fair. Hiring is the biggest risk. We would check local vacancies and locum rates before anything else. This report could not confirm current rates.
“Fewer premises is not less capacity. Sites got bigger.”	Partly true nationally. A count of every practice by name, town by town, would settle it for any area you are looking at.
“County numbers rounded to 5 are noise.”	One county could be noise. Ten at about half the rate of the rest of the UK is a pattern. We still call the exact figures approximate.
“Your county counts leave out Specsavers.”	Many of its stores, yes, because they are registered in Hampshire. That is why we compare with the rest of the UK without Hampshire, and why we make no claim about local openings or closures from these counts.
“A cheap chain test and a 40-minute independent test are not the same product.”	Agreed, and that is the point. The independent is selling time. The comparison shows the price a customer sees first.
“Plans and extra services are listed, but you have not shown anyone buys them.”	Correct. We found prices, not take-up. A paid report would ask practices that run plans, or use the client’s own numbers.

What we would check next

- Count every optician within a 20-minute drive of three shortlisted towns, by name, from the regulator’s register and each firm’s own site.
- Check the age of the owners of independent practices in those towns at Companies House, to find likely sellers.
- Ask the local NHS body which extra eye care services it pays practices to deliver in that area.
- Repeat the AI search test for those towns and record who is named.

9. Method, dates and limits

- **How it was made.** Three separate research passes collected official statistics, company facts and published prices. A fourth pass, which had not seen the collection, re-opened every source and tried to break each claim. It corrected several claims and removed the ones it could not confirm. A fifth step listed the strongest objections to each conclusion. Those are in section 8.
- **Business counts.** ONS UK Business Counts, local units and enterprises, industry code 47782, 2010 to 2026, read from the ONS Nomis service on 9 November 2026. Counts are rounded to the nearest 5.

- **Population.** ONS mid-2025 population estimates, all ages and 65 and over, read from Nomis on 9 November 2026.
- **Prices.** Each firm's own website, opened on 9 November 2026. We did not phone, visit or book. Independents are named by area only.
- **Left out.** Any figure we could not open and read on the day: England's NHS sight test totals, total market value in pounds, chain and independent shares, current store counts for four groups, and wage or locum rates.
- **Limits.** This sample is shorter than a paid report. It covers the whole UK, where a paid report goes down to the towns you name. Prices change. Many Specsavers stores are counted at its Hampshire head office, so area counts leave them out and cannot show local trends. We checked three store companies at Companies House to confirm this. Nothing here is advice to buy or open a business.

About this sample

- It uses public information only: official statistics, regulator and government pages, company websites and dated press reports.
- It is not a ranking, review, endorsement or criticism of any firm. No firm paid to appear or to be left out. Nobody ordered it.
- Brand names belong to their owners. Mentioning them does not mean they are linked to Whito or endorse this report.
- Facts are as at the dates shown and may have changed since. This is information and opinion, not legal, financial or professional advice. Check anything important before you act on it.
- If something here is wrong, use our corrections, right of reply and removals page. We will check it and fix genuine errors.
- How Whito earns its money is set out on our how we make money page.

Want this for your market?

One UK industry, region or opportunity. Official figures, who leads, published prices, the gaps, and what we would check next. You also get the spreadsheet behind every chart, a one-page summary and 30 days of written follow-up answers. £1,280, delivered within 15 working days of agreeing the scope.

Order your report: £1,280 **Ask a question first**

For UK businesses only. By ordering you agree to our terms and conditions. Prices in pounds, no VAT added.