# Belfast’s Donegall Place sees surge in retail occupancy and footfall after rate cuts



In recent months, Belfast's city centre has witnessed a rejuvenation in retail activity, particularly along Donegall Place, previously marred by numerous vacant units. Business group Belfast One has reported that several high-profile brands, including the lingerie retailer Victoria’s Secret, have started to occupy previously empty spaces, signalling a potential turnaround for the area. The arrival of new names, alongside established favourites like LEGO and Bershka, is heralded as a turning point for Belfast's shopping landscape.

Donegall Place, heralded as the city's primary shopping avenue, has faced significant challenges over the past decade, impacted by a combination of factors including a retail recession, the emergence of the Victoria Square shopping centre in 2008, and the fierce competition from online retailers. This myriad of pressures left many units unoccupied for extended periods. However, recent developments suggest a revitalisation, with stores like Zara undergoing extensive renovations and new tenants such as Gap and DW Sports securing substantial leases. The downward revaluation of property rates, with cuts reportedly as steep as 55%, has played a pivotal role in making the city a more attractive prospect for retailers. This reduction has not only alleviated the financial burden on businesses but also contributed to a newfound optimism among consumers, who are returning to shops in greater numbers.

Several indicators suggest that this positive trend in retail could continue. Notably, Donegall Place and nearby streets have recently gained traction as desirable locations for both UK and international brands. The surge in activity has been underpinned by a year-on-year increase in footfall, with a reported 39% more visitors to the city centre compared to last year. Initiatives aimed at tackling vacant properties, such as the Vacant to Vibrant scheme, have also injected life into the commercial landscape by providing vital funding for entrepreneurs to open new establishments.

Among the recently sprouted enterprises is Bodega Bagels, which has found success in a formerly empty shop space, aided by financial support that has allowed the owner to invest in necessary renovations. This initiative reflects broader efforts by the Belfast City Council to combat the high levels of commercial vacancy while simultaneously enhancing the city's appeal to shoppers, workers, students, and tourists. Improvements to infrastructure and amenities, coupled with an increase in leisure-focused offerings, position Belfast well on the path to becoming a thriving retail environment once again.

As the city adapts to current market dynamics, projections indicate continued interest from retailers, driven by robust economic recovery in the region. Enhanced consumer confidence suggests that, as more brands establish themselves in Belfast, the city may indeed be entering a new era of retail prosperity, reminiscent of its shopping heyday.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/northern-ireland/belfast-city-centre-sees-retail-revival-as-donegall-place-on-its-way-to-being-fully-occupied-once-again/a845464982.html), [[4]](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/major-belfast-retail-and-leisure-centre-opens-1.900711)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/northern-ireland/belfast-city-centre-sees-retail-revival-as-donegall-place-on-its-way-to-being-fully-occupied-once-again/a845464982.html), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-33024383), [[5]](https://bdcmagazine.com/2025/02/lego-to-build-a-new-home-in-northern-ireland-with-first-belfast-store/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/analysis/new-retailers-coming-to-belfast-shows-its-becoming-an-attractive-destination-for-uk-and-international-brands/34124545.html), [[6]](https://www.4ni.co.uk/northern-ireland-news/312187/belfast-city-centre-booms-in-summer)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce9nvvk447do)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/northern-ireland/belfast-city-centre-sees-retail-revival-as-donegall-place-on-its-way-to-being-fully-occupied-once-again/a845464982.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-33024383> - Donegall Place, Belfast's main shopping street, is showing signs of recovering some of its former glory. The street has been hit by a triple-whammy of a retail recession, the opening of Victoria Square shopping centre in 2008, and the challenge from online shopping. That has seen some units lie empty for months, if not years, at a time. But now there are signs of life. Fashion retailer Zara has recently expanded and refurbished its store. US clothing brand Gap will soon be relocating from Castlecourt shopping centre, sportswear retailer DW Sports has taken 12,500ft of space and the shoe brand Skechers will also be moving in. Perhaps the biggest reason behind this revival is rates, the annual property tax that occupiers must pay. A recent rates revaluation exercise, the first since 2001, means that rates have been cut by as much as 55%. That makes Belfast a much more affordable location to do business.
3. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/analysis/new-retailers-coming-to-belfast-shows-its-becoming-an-attractive-destination-for-uk-and-international-brands/34124545.html> - A retailer’s choice of location is crucial and they spend a lot of time getting it right. While some companies may have found it difficult to find exactly what they want in Belfast, the run of new retailers arriving in the city indicates it is becoming an increasingly attractive destination for both UK and international brands. We would expect this to continue as occupational costs are at a reasonable level, key retail streets such as Donegall Place and Royal Avenue have benefited from the recent rates revaluation and increased confidence in the economy means consumers are prepared to spend again. In the last few months alone we have seen brands such as Skechers and DW Sport open new stores on Donegall Place, Aldo has reopened its shop, GAP has moved to a new larger premises from its old Castlecourt site and Zara has also undertaken an extensive refurbishment and expansion. We know of a number of other retail companies looking at bringing more of their brands to the city. Since it opened Victoria Square has brought 80 new brands to Northern Ireland, including House of Fraser concessions.
4. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/major-belfast-retail-and-leisure-centre-opens-1.900711> - Northern Ireland's largest commercial project, the £400 million (€523 million) Victoria Square retail and leisure development in central Belfast, has been formally opened. Tens of thousands of shoppers yesterday crowded into the complex's four levels of covered, pedestrianised streets, eager to finally see the interior of the building that now dominates the city skyline. Its 75,000sq m (807,293sq ft) of retail space, roughly equivalent in size to Dublin's Dundrum Town Centre, increases the city's shopping floor by a third. It also includes 106 apartments and an eight-screen Odeon cinema due to open in June. Victoria Square is one of the largest inner-city retail developments in Europe and stands on a nine-acre site connecting the city centre with the newly developed Laganside area. The complex's 98 shopping units have attracted 39 new chains to Belfast, while also enabling established chains such as Topman and River Island to double and triple their operations in Belfast respectively. Flagship tenant House of Fraser has 18,500sq m of retail space, making it the company's largest in both the UK and Ireland. The development also houses many "aspirational" brands, including Hugo Boss, Reiss, Cruise, Coast, Tommy Hilfiger, All Saints, Hardy Amies and LK Bennett. Other tenants are toy store Hamleys, two jewellers Lunn's and Goldsmith's, and Saville Row tailors Ted Baker. Food outlets O'Brien's, GBK (Gourmet Burger Kitchen) and Nandos will have units in the centre, which also hosts a Virgin Megastore and Northern Ireland's first Apple computer store. It is estimated the centre will attract 17 million visitors a year, and that retail expenditure in Belfast will increase by £120 million (€157 million) - a rise of 17.2 per cent. Opening the development First Minister the Rev Ian Paisley said the city had "got a new heart".
5. <https://bdcmagazine.com/2025/02/lego-to-build-a-new-home-in-northern-ireland-with-first-belfast-store/> - The LEGO Group is set to open its first-ever store in Northern Ireland, choosing Victoria Square in Belfast as its flagship location. Expected to launch this summer, the 1,776 sq ft store will offer an immersive shopping experience, featuring a ‘Pick a Brick’ wall, a Minifigure Tower, and a host of interactive monthly events for fans of all ages. The arrival of LEGO follows a wave of new leasing activity at Victoria Square, with brands such as The White Company, Rituals UK & Ireland, Knoops, and JD Sports Fashion all expanding their presence at the retail destination. Russell Banham, UK Head at Commerz Real, Victoria Square’s asset manager, said: “The LEGO Group is one of the world’s most recognisable brands, and we are thrilled they have chosen Victoria Square for their first Northern Ireland store. As the region’s leading retail and leisure destination, this addition strengthens our already diverse mix of premium brands. It’s fantastic news not only for LEGO enthusiasts but also for the broader retail landscape in Northern Ireland.”
6. <https://www.4ni.co.uk/northern-ireland-news/312187/belfast-city-centre-booms-in-summer> - Belfast city centre enjoyed a successful summer season, with a surge in visitor numbers, footfall, and dwell time compared to the previous year. An estimated 133,490 visitors traveled to the city centre during July 2024, a 39% increase from the year before. Footfall rose by 24.1%, with retail core foot traffic increasing by 1.6%. Additionally, visitors spent an average of three hours and 26 minutes in the city centre, up 4% from the previous year. These figures were presented to Belfast City Council's all-party city centre working group, along with updates on various initiatives to enhance the city's vitality, cleanliness, safety, investment, and prosperity. Key developments include: New retail, hospitality and transport additions, including Charles Tyrwhitt on Arthur Street, H&M opening at The Keep, Amelia Hall on Howard Street, The Ivy Restaurant at Cleaver House, Seed on Donegall Place, Voco opening its first NI hotel at the Gasworks following a £3.6m refurbishment of the former Gasworks Hotel and The Foundry boutique hotel opening in the Cathedral Quarter following a multi-million-pound investment.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce9nvvk447do> - Belfast businesses have been giving a new lease of life to empty shop units in the city. Funding from Belfast City Council's Vacant to Vibrant scheme has given business owners the boost they need while also helping tackle the city's high levels of vacant buildings. New York-style bagel shop Bodega Bagels opened on Royal Avenue in October. Its owner, Steven Orr, told BBC News NI the funding was a "massive help", allowing them to kit out their kitchen space "without having to go into loads of debt, take out loans, and all that stress". Bodega Bagels has another location at Banana Block in east Belfast and used to have a stall at Trademarket on the Dublin Road before the site closed. Mr Orr and his partner spotted the potential of the Royal Avenue area a few years ago, realising it could become similar to Queen's and Botanic Avenue when the new Ulster University campus opened. "[Our premises] was a coffee shop, and we stood outside and looked at it and went, 'This would be perfect. It's on a corner, it's all red brick, there are big windows. It looks like a New York bagel shop.'" They "took a punt and got in early", he said, with the Belfast Stories visitor attraction also expected to open nearby and plans for a conference centre in the former Belfast Telegraph building. "We're hoping this becomes a really busy part of town." The funding helped Bodega kit out their kitchen. The Vacant to Vibrant scheme has been operating in the city centre since July 2022, and £500,000 in funding has been secured to roll it out for vacant Belfast properties beyond the city centre. The first city-wide application was approved this month and is due to be ratified at a full council meeting in February. To date, 40 city centre applications have been approved and 13 businesses have opened. There are three levels of capital grants available - up to £2,500, up to £15,000 and up to £25,000. If a grant application is successful, the applicant must contribute a minimum of 10% match funding. The scheme is helping tackle the problem of vacant buildings in Belfast. Chair of Belfast City Council's City Growth and Regeneration Committee, councillor Sam Nelson, said the scheme was "not only encouraging more footfall and spend in the city centre but also making our streets more attractive and diversifying the offer for shoppers, workers, students, and visitors". "Several of these buildings have lain unoccupied for years – and I applaud the people reinvigorating these properties for their vision, energy, and commitment," he added.