

New Eldon Square general manager hails city shopping centre's pandemic bounceback

The new manager of Newcastle shopping centre Eldon Square has told how the destination has emerged strongly from the pandemic to be one of the UK's best performers.

Like other shopping centres around the UK, Eldon Square suffered during the pandemic and the many lockdowns, having already taken a hammering as a result of the changing retail landscape. Big name retailers Dorothy Perkins, Debenhams and Top Shop are among the firms which have collapsed in recent years, the latter two leaving large empty units at the city centre.

But despite ongoing economic uncertainty and rising inflation, latest research from the British Retail Consortium (BRC) showed operators are now investing in store openings across the UK, with Eldon Square among those benefiting from the increasing optimism. Since former owners Intu collapsed, the centre it has been owned by administrators and managed by specialist investment manager Catella APAM and property management company MAPP.

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Cormac Hamilton started his new role as general manager for MAPP last November, and said Eldon Square is now at 97% occupancy, with hopes high that the empty Debenhams and Top Shop units will be filled soon. He said the centre is in talks with five operators looking to take on the empty Debenhams department store to give it a new lease of life, almost two years after it closed its doors.

He said his new role at the centre – which has 140 retail and leisure operators including John Lewis, Fenwick, Apple, Boots and Next, employs 4,000 people and covers 1.35m sq ft – marks the fruition of a long held ambition.

A former Royal Marine, he has managed shopping centres across the country with his experience ranging from the regional management of over 30 shopping centres in the Midlands to managing centres in Exeter, Hartlepool, Lincoln and Wakefield. He has also been chair of the Wakefield High Street Task Force, Savills National Shopping Centre management executive, and national lead for the Savills mystery shop programme.

He said: “The North East is a region that I love and when it comes to Eldon Square, the vision and values really resonate with me. The focus on community inclusion and experiential shopping very much aligns with my ambitions and goals of bringing the centre, and indeed the industry, into a new era; finding out what our customers, retailers, cafes and restaurants really value and then delivering on that.

“For 16 years I’ve wanted to run Eldon Square and be in Newcastle. I’ve always worked in cities but this is the biggest I’ve worked in. The centre has recovered well coming out of the pandemic – far better than a lot of centres around the UK. It’s a successful centre in city full of vitality, interest and history. It’s a real credit to Newcastle and the fact that retailers want to come here.

“I think the most important thing the centre has achieved is the density of offer we’ve achieved. Our occupancy rates are as good now as they have been, and even pre pandemic they are comparable. We’ve got some big vacancies, of course, like Debenhams and Top Shop, but overall we have a really interesting offer. Combine that with the overall offer of Newcastle city centre itself, the success of the Quayside, Ouseburn and the football team, it’s in a really good place.



Eldon Square shopping centre in Newcastle.
(Image: Newcastle Chronicle)



Shoppers in Eldon Square
(Image: Newcastle Chronicle)

“The centre is one of the busiest in the UK for footfall – in 2022 footfall was just under 26 million people, that’s big numbers. Over the Christmas period on one Saturday alone we had 142,000 people through – which was equal to some of our busiest days in 2018. It’s difficult to compare to pre-pandemic because the opening hours and number of retailers were totally different but we’re on the upward trajectory.”

In the last 18 months Eldon Square has seen 38 refurbishments and shop fits, 27 of which were new arrivals to the centre, including Bravissimo, Mango and the new H&M store, with more set to be announced. He said specialist teams have been drafted in, especially within leisure, to work with potential tenants to fill the remaining units.

He added: “The team are constantly working and liaising with all our contacts – locally, nationally and internationally – to fill those final vacancies. All credit to the team to have

done so well with what we have in the last 18 months. Interestingly we've also had a lot of interest from businesses and retailers that aren't in the city – some big names that aren't represented. Until contracts are signed, however, we can't reveal any."

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