

STORES

Outfit comes to town in Tyneside

Arcadia's catch-all format, Outfit, has opened its first store in a city centre – but will it work when there are so many of its featured fascias nearby? **John Ryan** visits the Newcastle shop



This is Outfit's first city centre store



Topman is in the basement

There are at least three places that shoppers can head to in central Newcastle if checking out what's on offer at Topshop is the mission.

For those requiring the full-blown experience, there is the Topshop/Topman in the newest bit of the Intu Eldon Square shopping centre. Stay in the same mall and in Fenwick there is an area set aside for the fashion brand and retailer. And if this still proves insufficient, there is Outfit.

The Outfit store on Northumberland Street is a home for all of the Arcadia group's brands (plus Oasis, Warehouse and Jack and Jones for good measure), and in a former life it used to be the city's BHS outpost. That closed in 2016 and it reopened as Outfit early in the summer this year.

Arcadia overload?

A cynic might be inclined to remark that Arcadia has regained control of a large unit

in a prime shopping area in Newcastle for a knockdown price. This may or may not be the case, but the real question is why are there so many Topshops in this city, and is there a need for Outfit?

For those unfamiliar with Outfit, the chances are good that you've not visited many out-of-town retail parks, as this is where almost all of this catch-all format's stores are to be found.

Newcastle is, in fact, the first city centre Outfit and it is, by any other name, a clothing department store.

The fact that most of the brands in the store are owned by Arcadia is coincidental. Like all department stores, this is a place where shoppers can go to get a taste of a broad range of brands without sampling the whole thing in standalone form.

Why this works has always been something of a puzzle, but the continued existence of

large numbers of department stores stands as testimony to their efficacy.

It has also been an effective way for Arcadia to get its branded wares on show to the out-of-town crowd without having recourse to renting what are generally quite sizeable units for each of its brands. Putting an Outfit in the centre of a large city is, however, an almost entirely different proposition.

From the outside, this is a perfectly respectable glass-fronted, three-floor store with the entrance in the middle of the fascia and above it a banner informing the curious about the brands that lie within.

Like all good department stores, it is the name of the store that dominates, with the brands being secondary to this. It is also very different from the kind of Outfit that edge-of-town shoppers will be familiar with, which tend to have a utilitarian feel to them.

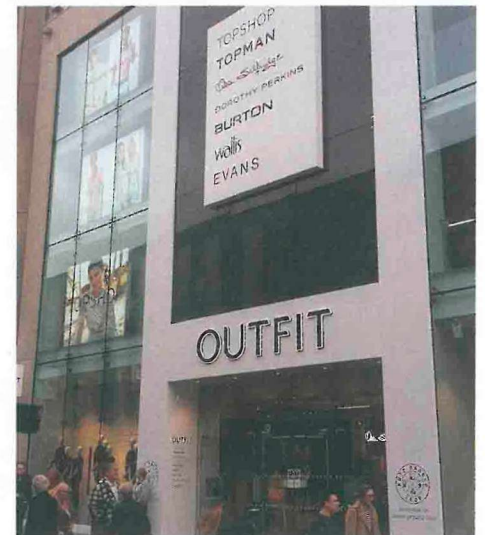
See more images of
this Outfit store
Retail-Week.com/Outfit-Newcastle



Outfit, Newcastle

Does Newcastle city centre need it?

- The assumption, presumably, is that this works as an Arcadia department store
- The store design is modern, but it is also highly impersonal
- The Outfit brand acts as a flag of convenience, with the brands taking prominence inside
- Topshop has the lion's share of the store's prime selling area
- There are multiple options for Arcadia's shoppers in Newcastle, possibly too many



It makes perfect sense as a vehicle to contain multiple brands away from a city centre, but the decision to bring it into town might not withstand close scrutiny

Yet walk into this one and it is immediately apparent that this is a house of brands, rather than a branded house. To the right, neon perimeter signage advertises Topshop, while to the left a lightbox on the wall in front of the escalator

informs the shopper about which brands are to be found elsewhere in the store.

At the rear of this floor a long cash desk has another large lightbox as part of its perimeter, while the rest of the wall is black with the word Outfit picked out in white neon.

The Warehouse and Oasis offers are at the back of the floor, and it is understood that plans are in place to expand the Topshop offer and condense these onto a single mat, which suggests the direction of travel for Outfit.

Cramped in men's

Head downstairs and the men's offer in this store is contained within a floorplate almost the same as the ground floor level, but with a very much lower ceiling.

This means Topman, Burton and, curiously, Jack & Jones have been fitted into what looks like a pretty tight merchandise space, with

the whole floor feeling cramped. This floor is aimed at a more 'mature' shopper, with Dorothy Perkins, Wallis and Evans occupying the space in a way that is perhaps a little reminiscent of the BHS of old.

Again, Outfit plays second fiddle to the various brands that are on offer and it is at this point that it is hard not to wonder why the Dorothy Perkins shopper wouldn't head for the very much larger space that the brand is given, alongside Wallis, Miss Selfridge and Burton, in Eldon Square.

Outfit is a curiosity. It makes perfect sense as a vehicle to contain multiple brands away from a city centre, but the decision to bring it into town might not appear to withstand close scrutiny.

All of which means that whether Newcastle is over-Topshopped is currently hard to tell, but you have to hope that Arcadia struck a good deal when this Outfit lease was signed. **rw**