

Discuss what can be done to revive high streets and the bricks-and-mortar retail experience to make it more exciting, successful and inclusive for all in a post-pandemic world.

The last two years have arguably been the most challenging for the high street with more boarded up buildings, fewer independent retailers and more graffiti clad buildings even in some of Britain's most affluent towns. However, even before this, there has been a gradual decline within the retail sector since the 1960s (Fletcher et. al, 2016). Covid-19 has, undoubtedly, exacerbated this trend by supercharging the technology-based takeover; leading to the dominance of younger online retailers such as Asos taking over.

Within this essay we will focus on, in my opinion, the three main solutions to help revive the high street in a post-pandemic world: introducing mixed-use development, community driven regeneration and government strategies.

The predominate narrative of which, is to transform the typical retail high street into a 'multifunctional' mixed use parade of retail, residential and office space. This aims to increase footfall in the area and bank on the 'personal' experience that the high street offers to customers, which cannot be replicated online, to increase usage. This is extremely important in reviving the high street as a lack of footfall can completely destroy our high streets as shown when working-from-home was introduced and the high street became a Zombieland within city centres (Carmona, 2021). To encourage the development needed, planning minister Robert Jenrick introduced a planning reform where any retail building vacant for three months is viable for development into residential property without the need for planning permission (Jenkins, 2021). Despite being controversial, with 'rightsizing' being the main agenda for most retail companies, the decrease in retail shops due to the bill maybe for the best.

The high street can use successful examples such as Stockton, which built a large outdoor community centre, to make the retail experience more exciting and inclusive, in an attempt to attract and keep people as they have a space to dwell and linger (Lowe, 2020). These solutions tackle the fundamental structural weakness of the retail market: oversupply (Savills, 2021). Whilst, also introducing new attractions such as reinstating historical frontages of retail units in Derby's Historical Cathedral Quarter which improved footfall and decreased vacancy rates (Ball et. Al. 2021). However, Knight Frank (2021) correct acknowledge that only a limited proportion of retail floorspace actually lends itself to alternative uses and is a more complex process than many appreciate.

In conjunction with a mixed-use high street, there needs to be a focus on community driven regeneration. For example, the Ministry for Housing have created a £150 million Community Ownership Fund to help community projects take over local pubs, restaurants or theatres at risk of closure (GOV.UK, 2021). Hubbard (2017) states that this locally led diversification, results in more exciting and inclusive areas which create well maintained areas where people want to return. This, uses the concept of placemaking, the process by which public spaces and buildings are shaped, in order to bring improvements from a cultural, economic and environmental perspective (PPS, 2007). A design which focuses on community needs rather than mass consumerism is shown in Midsteeple Quarter, Dumfries where a successful community-led initiative to develop a group of high street buildings into a live and work quarter is helping to reinvigorate the high street (McNabola, 2020). However, Cathy Parker, co-chair of the Institute of Place Management, has stated that even with these exciting high streets, there is still a reliance on footfall which is uncertain in a post-pandemic world.

None the less, a strong and effective government strategy is critical to creating mixed use, community led regeneration and other solutions to help revive the high street. Carmona (2021) discusses three models for government strategies to improve the high street. In my opinion, a mixed model where intervention is limited, except to stop the impacts the market fails to address, is most effective. For example, the implementation of planned shrinkage within the high street to increase associated intensification and improve the success of the high street (Maccreanor Lavington et. al, 2014) as shown in Figure 1.

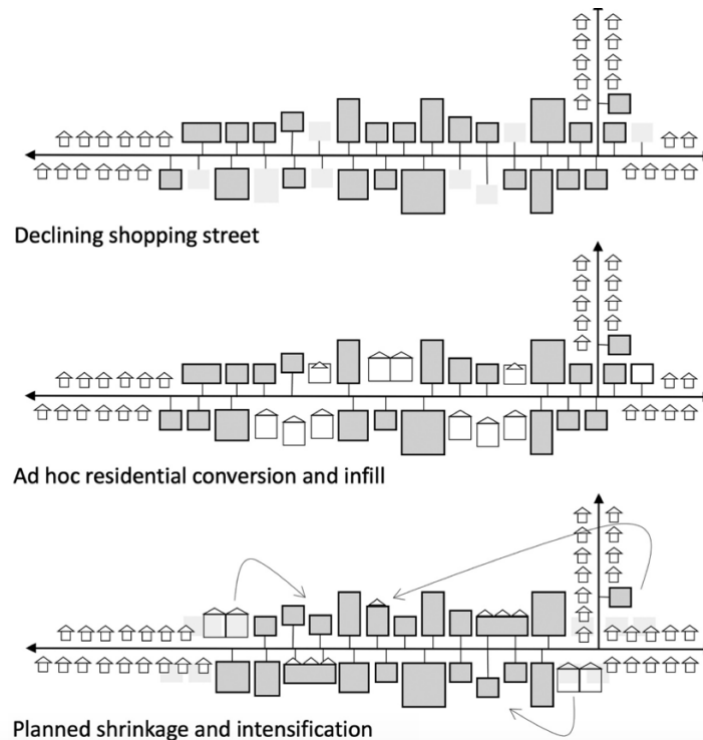


Figure 1: The impacts of planned shrinkage on the high street (Maccreanor Lavington et. al, 2014)

As well as this, government strategies such as ‘compulsory purchase orders’ to take over derelict buildings and enable more retail to be converted into new homes and entertaining spaces will create a more inclusive high street. These are being enacted within 15 Town Deals totalling £335 million. However, many local governments cannot afford these schemes with government finances battered by years of austerity-driven decline and the pandemic.

Lastly, another strategy, which I believe is beneficial to governments is the rise of sustainable high streets which have been proven to increase footfall and drive economic recovery. For example, Sheffield’s Peace Gardens increased shopping visits by 35% by £4.5 million (GOV.UK, 2021). These increase the experience of brick-and-mortar shopping to help revive the high street. Though overall, Leeson (2021) suggests that increasing the tax payable by online retailers, as it is drastically higher than brick and mortar retailers, would be the financial best solution to improving the high street.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the high street is in decline, but equally there are a number of strategies that can be used to revive it: a combination of these, properly targeted at individual towns will improve and rejuvenate town centres.

Word count: 905

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Figures

Figure 1: The impacts of planned shrinkage on the high street
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