

How to breathe new post-lockdown life into our dying high streets



Fven before the arrival of Covid-19, the future for Britain's high streets looked bleak. For at least two decades there has been talk of how town centres need to be rethought. The pandemic has made the need for action critical.

The next few weeks are not going to be a problem. Consumers, having been cooped up for so long, will be out in force when non-essential stores open for business on 15 June. Even though consumer confidence is low, the lack of spending opportunities since the country went into hibernation in late March means many people are in need of some retail therapy. High streets will get the benefit of a post-lockdown sugar rush.

Rishi Sunak has provided help for the retail sector by providing grants, a business rates holiday, a deferral of VAT payments and wage subsidies for furloughed workers. These, though, are only short-term fixes from the chancellor. The VAT still has to be paid; the business rates holiday will end; and the furlough scheme is being wound up at the end of October.

Before too long, the old familiar problems - and some new ones - will need to be addressed. Problem number one is that the shift of big retailers to edge of town locations has meant there is excess retail capacity in many high streets. Put simply, in many town centres there are now far too many shops - given the amount of spending that is actually taking place.

Problem number two is digital disruption: the ever-increasing share of spending that is happening online. The future of the traditional department store looks bleak because consumers can have the department-store experience on their laptop or smartphone, only with lower prices and without the inconvenience of getting the bus into town or finding parking.

Problem number three is that even those consumers who were late adopters of the idea of online shopping have now had a taste of it during the lockdown. Retailers fear that even those who like the physical pleasure of leafing through books or trying on a dress will bridle at having to mask up if they want to use public transport and wait in a physically distanced queue before they can be safely admitted to a shop. Given how easy the alternative is, those fears are well-merited.

The outlook is bleaker in towns than in big cities, and bleakest of all in the old industrial towns, where the hollowing out of manufacturing in the 1980s has been followed by the hollowing out of retailing in the past two decades.

Getting town centres humming again is central not just to economic regeneration but to improving wellbeing. The boarded-up shops, the pawnbrokers and the fast food outlets, according to a paper on England's health inequalities by the Bennett Institute for public policy at Cambridge University, are closely linked to their inhabitants' health outcomes.

The paper found that the built environment of towns, including the provision of green spaces and



▲ Getting town centres humming again is central both to economic regeneration and inhabitants' wellbeing. PHOTOGRAPH BY: VICTORIA JONES/PA

the kind of retail options they provided, made a real difference to life expectancy, prevalence of lung cancer and levels of obesity among children. In the more deprived towns, the previous upward trend in life expectancy had stalled or even gone into reverse.

Against the backdrop of a higher incidence of Covid-19 in the poorer parts of the country, the authors of the paper conclude: "There is an overriding need for policies to address the large and widening gaps

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in the health and economic fortunes of many towns, and these should be integral to the 'levelling up' and economic recovery agendas."

Thus far, it has to be said, there doesn't appear to be much of an economic recovery agenda. There is plenty of crisis management going on and a sense that the government is responding to events rather than planning for the future. Hence the weekend talk of speeding up the reopening of the hospitality sector because of fears of massive job losses.

The wartime coalition government found time to commission the Beveridge report, rethink education policy and sketch out plans for post-war full employment. A similar approach will be needed to reinvigorate town centres as part of a wider regeneration programme.

Some things are obvious. In most parts of the country, town centres will be about more than retail. Instead, the idea should be to make the middle of towns and smaller cities places where people live and work, not just shop. That would reduce the average age of the population and encourage the growth of businesses to cater for the

demands of young, working people with money to spend.

Nicholas Falk, who founded Urbed in the 1970s - a consultancy that specialises in urban development and regeneration, made a number of suggestions that were noted in a recent article for the Academy of Urbanism journal. These included redeveloping redundant retail space and surplus car parks into homes, workplaces and community hubs or social spaces. Local authorities, he says, should take over key buildings if they lie empty too long, as happened in bomb-damaged Comprehensive Development Areas after the second world war.

"Where town centre development is no longer viable, retailing will have to contract so better uses can take over. This requires government to play a more proactive role. Publicly owned land could be pooled, as it is in Copenhagen and Hamburg, with compulsory purchase orders used as a threat."

All sensible stuff. What is needed is a government strategy for urban regeneration that involves the devolution of power and money to a local level, plus a recognition that the time to act is now.

Agenda Item 4

