

Will charity shops kill the High Street?

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Britain's charity shops are under pressure. Oxfam is reportedly considering closing up to 100 High Street stores, after other major charities have closed theirs. But this issue is about much more than charity shops.

For decades, charity shops have filled the gaps left as traditional retailers disappeared from town centres. They have provided affordable goods, opportunities for recycling, income for charities and, crucially, places where people volunteer, meet others and participate in their communities.

Now that model is under threat. More people are selling unwanted goods themselves through platforms such as eBay and Vinted. Charity shops are finding it harder to obtain the quality donations on which their profitability has depended. If they begin disappearing from our High Streets, what replaces them?

Another cafe? Another barber? Another vape shop? Or simply another empty building?

In this video, I argue that we need to think much more radically about what the High Street is for. Town centres do not have to be exclusively retail spaces. They could provide housing, leisure facilities, community spaces and the "third spaces" where people can meet without being required to spend significant amounts of money.

This is not just a property problem. It is a people problem.

If the High Street is going to survive, local authorities and government need to start reimagining it now.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEa4aWI2I6k?si=E9_L2MmdoYVTKy3i

The audio version is running late at present and will be published later.

The Debate Ammunition for this video is available [here](#).

This is the transcript:

I saw a report very recently that suggested that Oxfam is considering closing up to 100 of its High Street stores in the UK. Now, this follows other charities that have done the same thing. The British Heart Foundation has, I think, shut 150 stores, and Cancer Research has shut 90 already and may be considering more.

The charity sector is retreating from our High Streets, and that is economically significant because one of the things that has identified the High Street for the last 25 years or so, in many smaller towns in particular, has been the presence of the charity shop.

The charity shop has filled all those vacant premises resulting from the disappearance of so many conventional stores: the butcher, the baker, not the candlestick maker, but the tailor or whatever else, the clothes shops, the bookshops. They all went and the charity shop arrived. But if the charity shop is now leaving, and it appears that they are, what is going to happen to the High Street?

First of all, what is happening to the charity shop? They aren't making money. That's the simple answer to this. They cannot cover their costs of being on the High Street, and their duty as a charity shop is, of course, to make money to contribute to the charity that has promoted the activity.

So they're shutting because people are not making as many donations as they used to. And why is that? That's because the best items that used to go to charity shops and provided the core of their trading profitability are now going on sites like eBay and Vinted and things like that, where people are selling them themselves because that is essential for them to survive and, for some people, to create a little bit of extra income to keep life together.

Now, I'm not arguing people shouldn't be selling those items. I'm not arguing that that isn't very effective recycling, but I am saying it does represent a major shift in the UK retail environment. These stores have provided retail opportunities for many people, for many High Streets, for many places, as well as a major social activity for those who volunteer in them, in a way that might disappear.

We are therefore seeing something really significant if these stores have to leave the local community environment because we will lose that retail opportunity. We will lose that chance for people who don't go online to actually recycle in the way that they want to. We will lose those social opportunities that these shops bring.

And I use these shops on occasion. I see no reason why not. Oxfam is one of my regular book suppliers. They have a great secondhand book sales facility, and I use it. But what is clear is that their physical presence is changing.

Now, apart from all those social dimensions I've already mentioned, let's be clear: this has a sort of geographic element to it as well, because what we're going to see is a rise in the vacancies in our High Streets.

That is particularly significant in a place of the sort where I live. I live in Ely, in Cambridgeshire, and I would think that half of our High Street is made up of charity shops. Each of them appears to make money at present. Presumably they can cover the rent. I don't think they have to pay business rates because they are charity activities, but I'm not sure about that. But the point is they are able to generate money, but maybe they won't in the future.

And if they depart, it's very hard to imagine what will take their place. We've already got a lot of cafes. We already have an excess of vape shops. What are we going to put in their place? Well, we already have an excess of barber shops as well. Those have grown in number of late. So what is the replacement? It's very hard to imagine what it will be.

Reimagining the High Street

If the charity shop sector does begin to close down, and the possibility looks to be real, if these major players withdraw from the High Streets, then others will surely follow, and what that means is that we are going to have to reimagine the High Street.

Now, this, of course, started 25 or 30 years ago with the spread of the out-of-town store and the rise of the large supermarket on the edge of our towns. This is now the next stage of that process of change. What we are now seeing is something which is almost catastrophic for the High Street, really, because there is going to be nothing there.

It will have an impact on the other activities as well. If you go to what looks like a desolate place, why are you going to want to buy your coffee there?

If there's nothing to do, nothing to browse in, and people do undoubtedly, from the experience that I have of seeing people in these places, browse in the charity shops, why will people support the other activities?

There is a multiplier effect in this, in other words, as there is in so much economic activity. When one source of activity declines, others do as well. And I'm worried about this, and I think this does require political imagination.

Let's assume that Cancer Research, the British Heart Foundation and Oxfam are the canaries in the mine, or the canaries on the High Street, more appropriately. If they're going, others will. If they're going, the vacancies will rise. If the vacancies rise, the

problem with town centres in the UK is going to become, well, insurmountable unless we change our approach to these issues.

The problem has been that local authorities have demanded that stores be replaced by other stores.

They will allow minor variation in use or purpose. So they will allow a retail store to become a barber's or become a cafe, but they don't reimagine the whole idea of what the town centre might be.

What they're not thinking about is: can these become more broadly a leisure facility?

Can they become a community space?

Can they become a place where people live so that they're there in the town centre to support the activities that are going on anyway?

Can we imagine them as being something other than yet another vape shop, yet another cafe, or whatever?

Have we got the sense that we can rebuild the idea of community in the High Street very differently from what it has been?

And we've talked about this recently in a podcast. Thomas and I talked about the fact that there is a problem with the lack of community spaces, what I called "third spaces" in that podcast, the places where people can meet and exchange without a hierarchy of structure within society and without great pressure to undertake major economic exchange.

That's what we need. That's what we must have. That is what is going to be required when these stores leave.

A people issue

I'm worried. I'm worried for our High Streets. I'm worried for our communities. I'm worried for the people who depend upon these presences to find a location where they can literally have a life.

And that is the risk that the absence of charity shops will create. For many people, there won't be a life that will take them into the town centre. And if they don't go into the town centre, where do they go? And if they don't have anywhere to go, who do they see? How do they communicate? How do they exchange? How do they live?

This is a real social concern. If we are to have vibrant communities, if we are to have spaces that are used for the benefit of people, we need local authorities who can now reimagine the spaces for which they're responsible, who can reimagine planning

permission, who can reimagine opportunity, and who can find the funding that is necessary to create community spaces, which they might have to lead if they are to be successful.

And the government needs to respond to this as well. This is about thinking at the ultra-micro level about what creates wellbeing, what lets people thrive, which is one of my major concerns on this channel, and what creates a good life. If we do not have the shops that have created that opportunity, because, remember, a great many people do get their social meaning out of volunteering in these places, what are we going to put in their place? That, to me, is the question that matters. I don't so much worry about the fact we've got a property issue. I worry that we have a people issue here, and if we don't solve that, our communities are going to be in trouble.

And the idea of communities in trouble does not appeal to me. As we head for an economic recession, and I believe we are, this question is going to become ever more relevant. We will lose more High Street stores if we have an economic downturn. We will have greater social stress. What are we going to do about it? How are we going to use our High Streets to solve this problem?

I haven't got all the answers, but I do know that without proactive local authorities who are willing to create processes of change and to experiment to deliver those changes, we are going nowhere. The High Street is worth saving. It's at the centre of our communities.

Now is the time to think about this. The crisis has not yet become overblown. But it could. And that is why action is needed now.

That's what I think. What do you think? There is, of course, a poll down below. Let us have your opinions. Please do like and share this video. Please do subscribe to our channel and click that bell button so you hear more about this and other issues that we talk about. And if you want to buy us a coffee, because we do sometimes need to go out for one, that would be great.

Poll

[poll id="503"]