



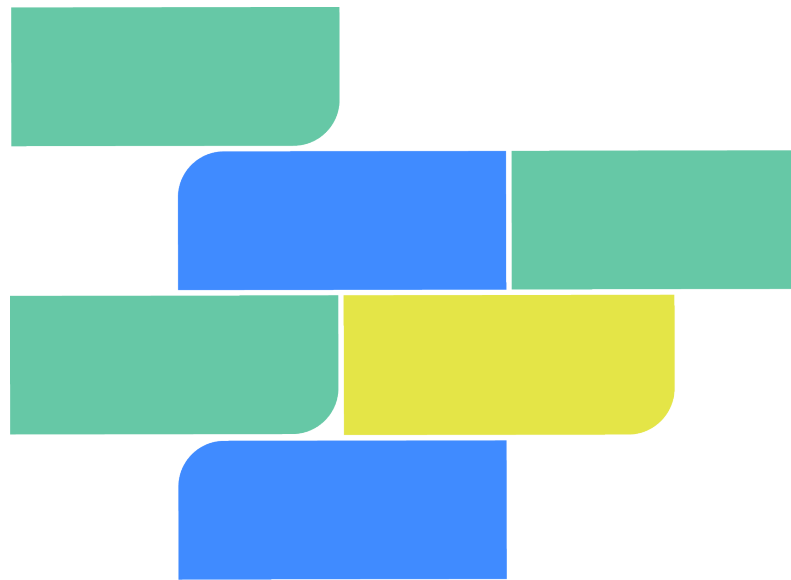
Backing
community
business

Department stories

How communities are reimagining a national institution

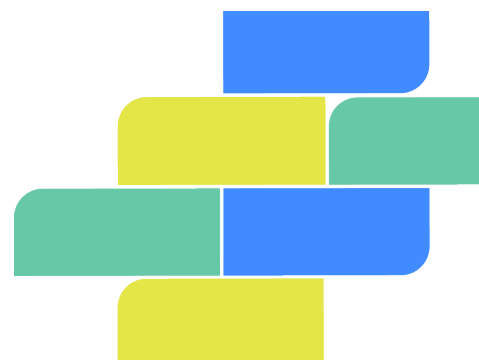
Jessica Craig, with case studies by Laura Potter

December 2024



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About Power to Change

Power to Change is the think-do tank that backs community business.

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them. We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.

Taking back the high street

The UK's high streets are the beating hearts of our communities. But they've reached a tipping point.

Many of our high streets are in decline. The demise of department stores and the rise of out-of-town and online retail have changed how we shop. Each year, more shuttered buildings sit empty on our high streets. They are left this way by distant owners without a stake in the local community, and many stay vacant for years.

But across the country, people are taking back their high streets. More and more communities are taking ownership over key assets. Community businesses are helping create destination spaces that serve local needs.

We want communities to have the power to create vibrant and resilient high streets that work for them. But to do so, local people must have a seat at the table. They need the opportunities and resources to take ownership of the spaces and places that matter to them.

Through evidence and advocacy, we're working to help communities take back the high street. With robust research and analysis, we're understanding the changing trends and challenges facing our high streets. And through work with communities on the ground, like our Community Improvement District Pilots and Community Led High Street Innovators, we're testing and developing community led solutions.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this report – especially the staff and volunteers behind Department, Haven Community Hub, Sparks and Dewsbury Arcade.

A special thank you to Laura Potter, who authored the case studies included in this report.

Interviewees

Kathryn Chiswell Jones	Artspace Lifespace (Sparks)
Jenny Foster	Global Goals Centre (Sparks)
Mike Nicholson	Age Concern Southend (Haven Community Hub)
Chris Hill	Arcade Group (Dewsbury Arcade)
Sharon George	Shademakers UK (Department)
Robin Didier	NewRiver REIT
Nicky Owen	Sefton Council
Kaavous Clayton and Julia Devonshire	originalprojects (Primeyarc)



Executive summary

Once a destination for generations of shoppers, department stores are on the decline. The growth of out-of-town retail and subsequent shift to online shopping have contributed to an 85% decrease in the number of department stores on Britain's high streets over the past decade, with many well-known brands leaving our towns for good. With an oversupply of retail space on our high streets, new uses must be found for these national institutions.

A number of new and creative uses of former department stores and other shopping spaces are emerging, with these spaces reopening as cultural hubs, workspaces and health centres. Often, these spaces combine elements of retail with new activities to create a mixed-use space, providing an offer that can draw a greater and wider audience back to the high street.

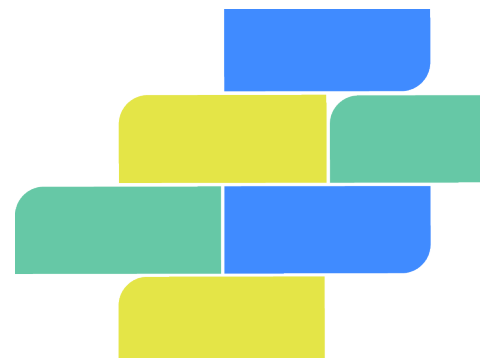
Communities across the country are also developing their own solutions to the decline of department stores, tackling both high street vacancy and the loss of these important social spaces. They are part of a wider movement of communities taking back their high streets, bringing new life to old buildings to strengthen their communities and keep money circulating in their local economies.

The reimagining of these spaces is consistent with public sentiment about department stores. While just 8% of British shoppers regularly do most of their shopping in a department store, polling by More in Common for Power to Change suggests that 90% of people want to see former department stores reimagined, either for shopping or for new purposes like public service delivery, entertainment and leisure, housing and community space.

Through case studies and interviews with four community businesses managing department stores and town centre shopping spaces, supplemented by insights from other high street stakeholders, this report explores the opportunities of community reuse of department stores, as well as the challenges entailed in running them for broad community benefit.

Case studies

Four case studies of community reuse of department stores and other town centre shopping spaces provide a snapshot of how communities are breathing new life into these assets. They illustrate the range of activities, services and opportunities community businesses are providing for local people, rooted in their understanding of what their communities want and need. Each blends aspects of the traditional department store experience (such as shopping and social spaces like cafes) with new uses that are diversifying the high street offer. The organisations managing these projects have

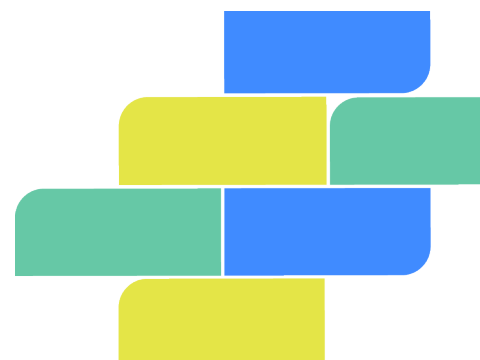


come to them on different terms (see table 1) but each is seeing significant benefits for their local community and the vitality of their high street.

Department in Ryde, Isle of Wight



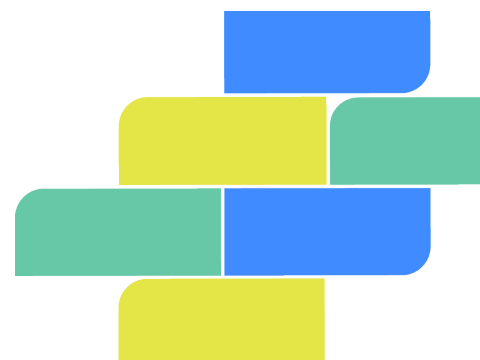
Department is a project of arts organisation Shademakers, in the former Packs independent department store in Ryde. Embracing more than 300 years of creativity and craftsmanship on this site, after a major refurbishment designed with Turner Works, Department will provide a multipurpose hub for locals and visitors to engage with arts and culture on the Isle of Wight.



Haven Community Hub in Westcliff-on-Sea



Haven Community Hub is a one-stop hub for older people and their families in Westcliff-on-Sea. Creating a positive legacy for the former Havens department store, this project of Age Concern Southend now operates a dementia day care service, a diverse health and wellbeing offer, and a community cafe that draws in visitors of all ages, helping to drive footfall back to the area's shopping district.



Sparks in Bristol



Sparks, run by Artspace Lifespace and the Global Goals Centre, is reinvigorating Bristol's Broadmead shopping district in a former Marks & Spencer, which closed in 2022 after more than 70 years in the city centre. Sparks is a unique, interactive department store for everyone, based around experience and not just retail. Using its city centre location and diverse footfall, Sparks is attracting a wide cross-section of the community to engage with education around sustainability with a retail offer of independent businesses to match this ethos.



Dewsbury Arcade in West Yorkshire



Dewsbury Arcade is a Victorian Grade II listed shopping arcade in the heart of Dewsbury. Once a popular town centre thoroughfare, the Arcade Group hopes the arcade – England’s first community-run shopping centre – will help spark the wider regeneration of the town centre. Currently the arcade is undergoing major regeneration works to make the space fit to serve further generations of residents and, when it reopens in Autumn 2025, it will provide space for local entrepreneurs and activities to bring residents back to the town centre.

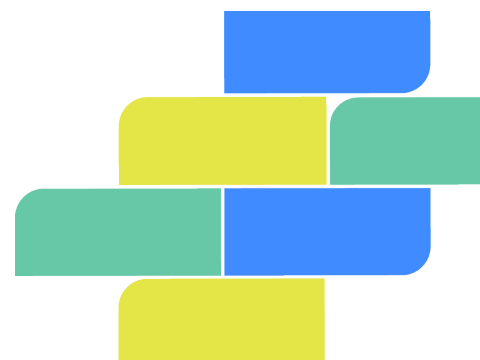


Table 1. Ownership and lease type of the projects

Project	Lead organisation	Building ownership	Lease details
Department Ryde, Isle of Wight	Shademakers (community interest company)	Private owner	40-year lease Rent scaling up over time from a peppercorn rent to a commercial rent
Haven Community Hub Westcliff-on-Sea	Age Concern Southend-on-Sea (registered charity)	Private owner, raising funds to purchase the asset	20-year lease Commercial rent
Sparks Bristol	Artspace Lifespace and Global Goals Centre (registered charities)	Private owner	Rolling one-year lease Peppercorn rent
Dewsbury Arcade Dewsbury, West Yorkshire	The Arcade Group (community benefit society)	Local authority	Ten-year lease

Analysis: The opportunities and challenges of community reuse of department stores

Opportunities

Flexible space and town centre locations

Former department stores provide a large, flexible and central space for community activity that can be adapted to meet local needs and encourage creativity and collaboration across community groups and projects. Their high street location can increase the visibility of community businesses, make their offer more accessible to local people, and draw in new audiences to engage with their work.



Contribution to a civic high street

By creating an experience-led offer, these community businesses are helping to revive the civic function of the high street and the role that department stores once played in creating social connection. They are responding to the significant demand for more town centre space to meet and connect, and for opportunities to access activities and services on the high street at low or no cost.

Engagement with local regeneration initiatives

Each of these projects is connected and contributing to multiple heritage and regeneration initiatives, working with local partners such as the council, businesses and residents to increase footfall and improve the state and offer of the high street. Community businesses value the opportunity to contribute to local regeneration initiatives and help to curate a high street that reflects the needs and desires of their community, using their trusted local relationships to understand what works.

However, some of these groups have also experienced challenges in gaining a seat at the table, to determine how their high streets are run and how inward investment is used – reflecting the wider experience of community businesses across England.

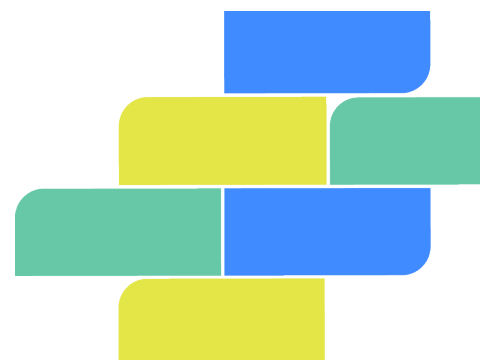
Challenges

Lease conditions and building repair

Beyond the physical limitations of purpose-built department stores, such as a lack of natural light and outdoor space, these spaces often demand significant repair and maintenance, which can be costly for community businesses. Furthermore, due to their age, these spaces may require significant works to make them fully accessible to their community.

Financing community assets

While occupying department stores can help community businesses to diversify their income streams and create new opportunities for their business, they nonetheless face difficulties in attracting the finance needed to manage and develop these spaces. For example, meanwhile and short-term leases can make it difficult to access investment, particularly for larger funding opportunities and capital projects. It can also be difficult to attract funding at the scale required for communities to purchase these spaces – particularly in light of the freezing of the Community Ownership Fund. High business rates on the high street and the high utility costs of large department store spaces also place significant strain on the finances of community businesses.



Policy context and recommendations

Creating more vibrant and economically flourishing high streets is a policy challenge that successive governments have grappled with. The Conservatives' levelling up agenda sought to restore pride in place, including where high streets have seen significant decline, while the introduction of the Community Ownership Fund provided a much-needed source of investment for community asset ownership and development. High streets are also high on the agenda of the new Labour Government, with plans to introduce a new Community Right to Buy, changes to the business rates system and new powers for councils to tackle high street vacancy all announced in the first months of the Parliament.

As these four community businesses demonstrate, communities can offer a solution to the problem of vacant town centre spaces that no longer fit the retail-focused purpose for which they were designed. However, to do this, they will require a supportive policy landscape that favours a more mixed-use, experience-led vision for the high street. At this moment of political change, and with growing policy momentum around high street rejuvenation and community ownership, this is a golden opportunity to enable communities to take back their high streets.

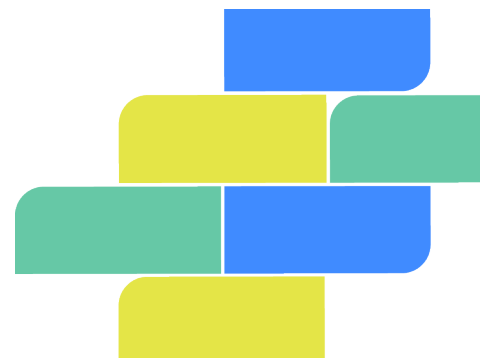
To achieve this transformation, the new Government should empower communities to create the civic high streets of the future and steward high street assets through community ownership.

To help communities create civic high streets, government should:

1. Give communities the tools they need to take back the high street through a Civic High Streets Accelerator

To enable communities to revitalise their high streets and town centres through community leadership, ownership and economic development, government must implement a cohesive policy, funding and support framework.

A Civic High Streets Accelerator would ensure communities can make best use of new powers and resources for community ownership to transform their high streets, by providing expert support for community-led regeneration, creating opportunities for communities to get involved in the governance of the high street, mapping funding opportunities and boosting communities' local economic contribution through community ownership.



2. Channel local growth and regeneration funding to support the creation of more civic high streets

As the new Government contemplates the design of future local growth and regeneration funding, and its own answer to levelling up, it should ensure these investments support communities to experiment with bringing new activities and offers to their high streets.

Future funds should make it essential for councils to collaborate with those who know best what their communities need from their town centres – including community businesses – and should empower them to take action.

3. Create a fairer model of business rates that rewards those who are restoring their high streets

The Government's review of business tax must not only address the imbalance between physical and online retail, but should also recognise the contributions of those who are bringing life back to the high street by permanently lowering the rates that community businesses pay on their high street assets – particularly where they are occupying spaces that might otherwise be left empty to decay further.

And to support more communities to own assets on their high streets, government should:

4. Expand the scope of eligible assets under new high street regeneration and community ownership powers

Government should take a more expansive view of the assets that communities may wish to develop. As recommended in the Power to Change report *Getting it right: Introducing and implementing a Community Right to Buy*, the definition of Assets of Community Value in the Localism Act should be updated to cover buildings or land that further the social, economic and/or environmental wellbeing and interests of the local community. It should also include assets that may perform this function in the future as well as those with an existing community use. This would expand the scope of assets eligible under the Community Right to Buy, and make it easier for communities to use these powers to take ownership of former retail assets like department stores.

Additionally, High Street Rental Auction legislation, and any future powers to tackle vacancy, should include all commercial asset types within a high street area. This would enable communities and other high street stakeholders to identify and take on the assets most likely to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits locally.



5. Extend, expand and improve the funding for community ownership

Following the conclusion of the Community Ownership Fund, the Government should extend, expand and improve the funding available for community ownership to £1 billion over ten years. This should be drawn from a range of sources, including government grant, charitable foundations, social investment and Dormant Assets, with a government contribution of approximately £300 million over this period.

Some of this funding would be ringfenced to deliver capacity-building support, so more communities can take advantage of the opportunity of community ownership, and ensure these assets remain in stable community ownership for years to come.

6. Introduce a British High Street Investment Vehicle

Additionally, to boost community-led regeneration and tackle high street vacancy, a portion of this expanded fund would be dedicated to supporting the creation of a British High Street Investment Vehicle. This agile investment vehicle would support community-led high street regeneration by purchasing and restoring a diversified portfolio of vacant high street properties to be transferred into community ownership, over time and with support.

7. With councils, make communities a first resort to take on assets on the high street.

All local authorities should adopt a comprehensive Community Asset Transfer strategy with a clear approach to the management of publicly owned assets. This should position communities as a first, not last, resort for the disposal of public assets – particularly those designated as Assets of Community Value – to safeguard their function as social infrastructure against privatisation or disuse. Councils should prioritise community management and ownership of publicly owned assets in the town centre to deliver broad community benefit through the regeneration of these spaces.



Introduction

The decline of the department store

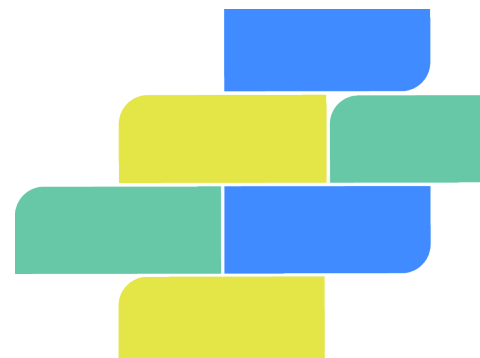
With the first recognisable department stores emerging in the mid-19th century, these spaces have long been a part of the fabric of Britain's high streets. Originating as a place to buy the latest fashions and luxury goods, some department stores – such as Harrods and Selfridges – have remained close to this luxury retail heritage. Others emerged to serve a wider range of purposes, as a one-stop shop to meet all the needs of the family and the home.

Beyond retail, department stores also have a legacy as important social spaces. Their cafes and restaurants have not only provided space for weary shoppers to relax, but also served as central and accessible places for people to meet and socialise. For many people, department stores also evoke memories of elaborate window displays, Christmas decorations and events like fashion shows, which have drawn people to the high street for a special experience beyond just shopping.

But Britain's high streets are changing and, with them, the role of department stores. With the rise of first out-of-town retail centres and then online shopping, exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on physical retail, we've seen the decline and disappearance of many of the department stores that have served generations of shoppers, and uncertainty about what will take their place.

Data from Storepoint suggests that over the past decade, 85% of department stores occupied by the former 'traditional' operators (such as Beales, British Home Stores, Debenhams, House of Fraser and John Lewis) have closed down.¹ Changing retail trends have also impacted independent department stores such as Fenwick's, which closed its flagship New Bond Street store after 133 years of trading in February 2024.

Beyond the 'traditional' department stores, other major high street retailers are also reducing their physical footprint due to the growth of online sales. While retailers like Marks & Spencer may not meet historic definitions of the department store, their offer of a range of consumer goods and function as social and communal spaces on the high street mirror those of more traditional department stores, and their disappearance from the high street presents a similar challenge. They are therefore included within the scope of this report. John Lewis has closed at least 12 of its department stores since 2020. Marks & Spencer also announced plans to cut 67 of its 247 'full line' (food, clothing and homewares) shops between 2022 and 2028, and redevelop its iconic art-deco Oxford Street store into a ten-storey mixed-use building.² The latter has proved controversial, but inspired a range of proposals that would transform the flagship store into an experience-led civic space.



The disappearance of department stores has left a significant gap on many high streets and vacant buildings which, with an estimated 20-40% oversupply of retail space in the UK, can be difficult to fill.³ After entering administration in 2020, Debenhams closed all 126 of its department stores, and as of June 2024, around half of the buildings remained vacant or were awaiting redevelopment.⁴ Reflecting the changing demand for high street retail space, only a third of former Debenhams stores are now occupied by retail.

Public perceptions

While department stores were conceived as a way to meet a variety of shopping needs under one roof, this no longer seems to fit the public's shopping habits. New polling by More in Common for Power to Change suggests that only 8% of British shoppers do most of their shopping in department stores. Meanwhile, 37% shop mostly on the high street or in the town centre, followed by 34% who do most of their shopping online and 21% who use retail parks and shopping centres away from the town centre.⁵

Nor do department stores attract the seasonal interest they once had as a place for Christmas shopping. While previous generations of shoppers may have been drawn into department stores by their elaborate Christmas displays and festive activities, it seems that even Christmas cannot save the department store. Just 7% of shoppers plan to do most of their Christmas shopping in department stores this year, while almost half (44%) say they will do most of their Christmas shopping online. Twenty five per cent plan to shop on the high street – a drop of 12% compared to the rest of the year – and 14% will shop at retail parks and shopping centres away from the town centre.⁶

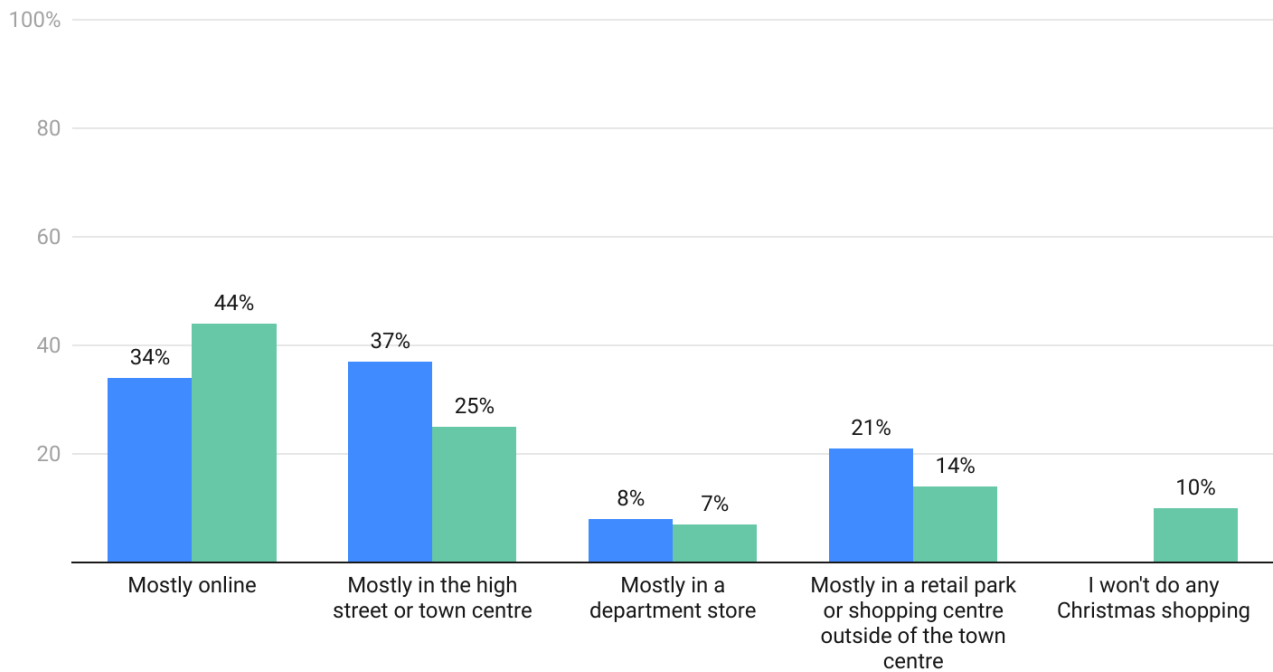


Figure 1 : Christmas shopping habits

Where people usually go to shop compared to where they plan to do their shopping for Christmas

■ % of respondents asked 'Where do you usually go to shop?'

■ % of respondents asked 'Where do you plan to do your shopping this Christmas?'



Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 November - 2 December 2024).

Sample size = 2,002.

• Created with Datawrapper

The convenience of online retail appears to be a key driver of decline of shopping locally, with 41% of people saying that it is easier to shop somewhere other than the high street. Additionally, people feel that the variety (33%) and affordability (26%) of goods available on the high street cannot compete with those available elsewhere. While department stores once offered the convenience of a one-stop shop for different types of products, today online shopping allows people to shop a wider range of goods at the click of a button.

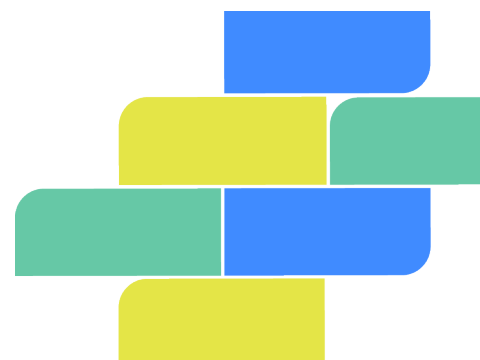
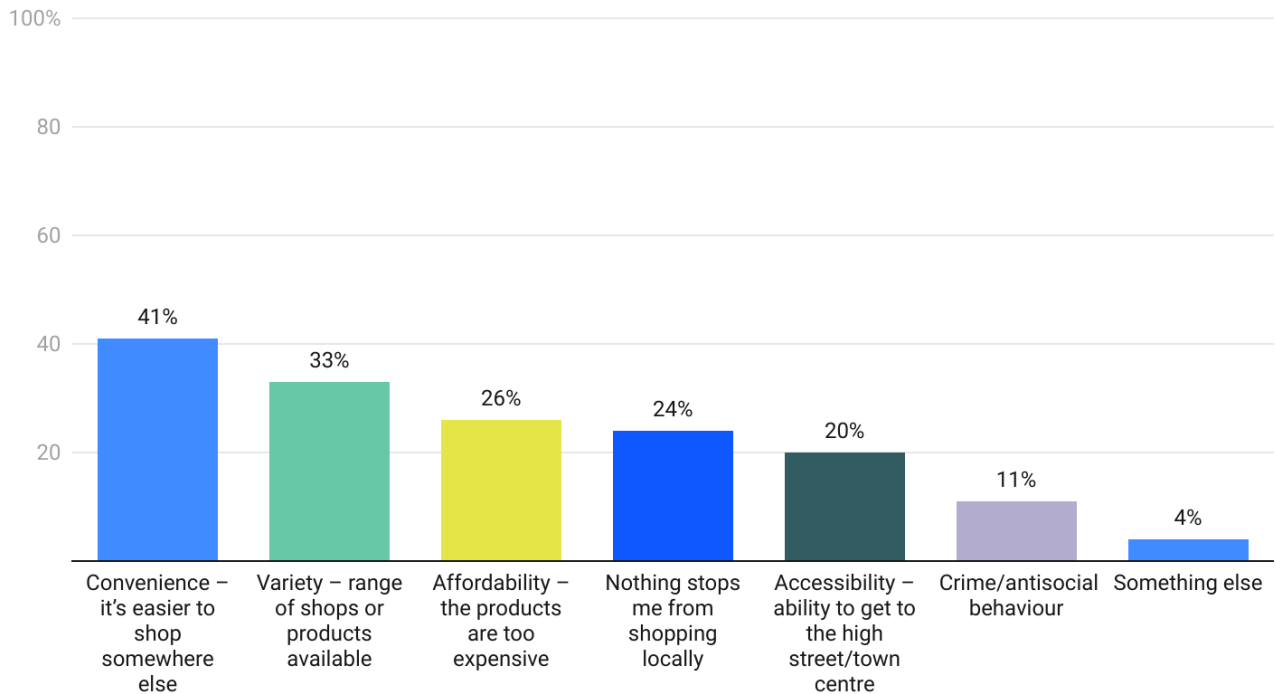


Figure 2: Reasons people are not shopping locally

If you're not shopping locally, on the high street or in the town centre - what prevents you from doing so?
Select all that apply.



Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 November - 2 December 2024).
Sample size = 2,002.
• Created with Datawrapper

These sentiments also reflect a wider sense of pessimism among the British public about the state of the high street. Despite successive government interventions to regenerate high streets and town centres and restore pride in place, almost three quarters of people (73%) think their high street has gotten worse in the last few years. Only seven per cent think the state of their high street has gotten better.

High street vacancy is clearly a key driver of this view. Of those who think their high street has gotten worse, 60% feel that the closure of shops is contributing to decline, and 39% for empty buildings and unused spaces. Again, the variety on offer on the high street appears to be a key concern, with 31% saying that there are too many of the same types of businesses on the high street.

These perceived drivers of decline indicate the need for a new offer on the high street, which can tackle vacancy and bring new variety to the high street. With the supply of retail space now

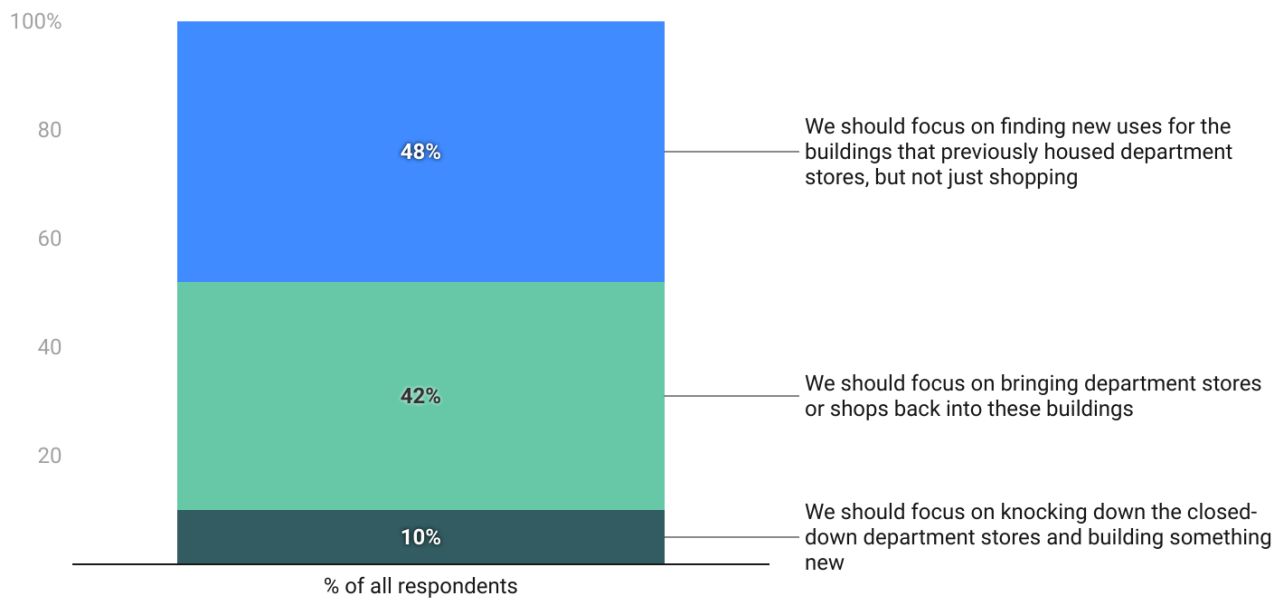


outstripping demand in many places, it is clear that a retail dominated model for the high street is no longer appropriate and a more mixed-use vision for the high street is needed.

This is further supported by the public's view of what should be done with vacant former department stores. An overwhelming majority of people want to see former department stores brought back to life, either for shopping (42%) or for new uses beyond retail (48%). There is clear appetite among the public for former department stores to take on a range of new uses, including: delivery of public services such as GP and dental surgeries (45%), leisure and entertainment (42%), housing (42%) and community space (34%).

Figure 3: Public opinion on solutions for empty department store buildings

This Christmas, there are 85% less department stores open than a decade ago. Given this, which of the following comes closest to your view?

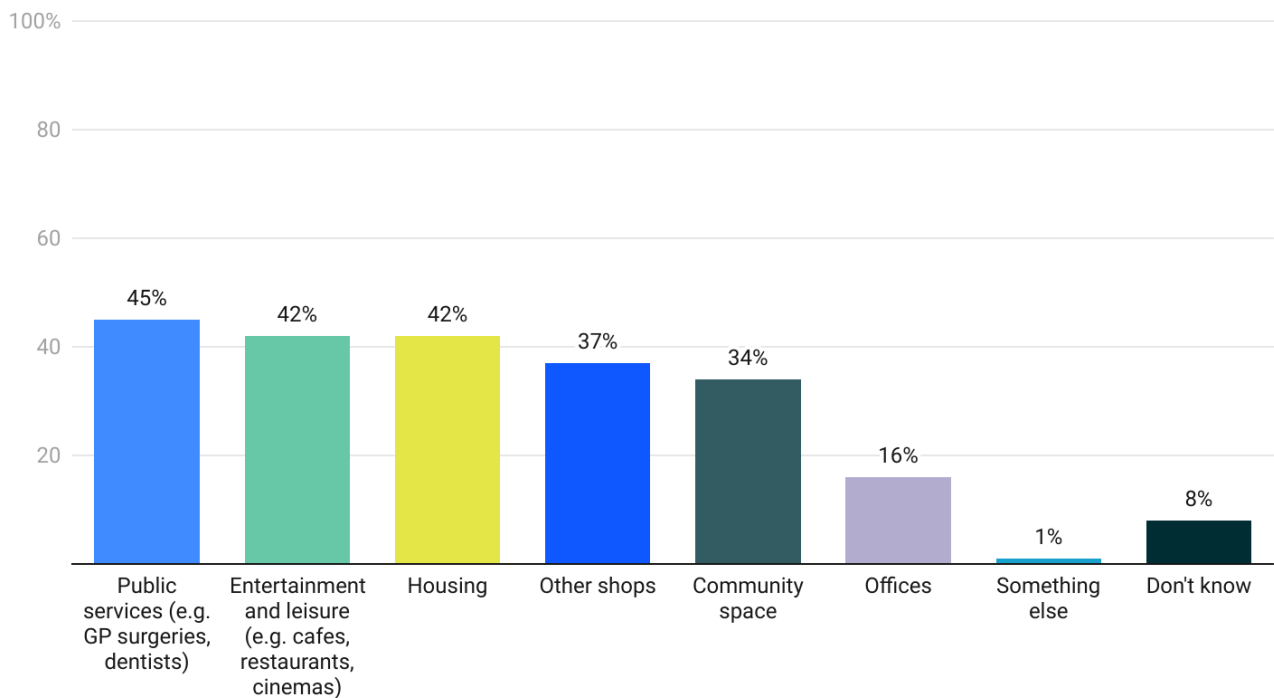


Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 November - 2 December 2024).
Sample size = 2,002.
• Created with Datawrapper



Figure 4: Public opinion on alternative uses for empty department stores

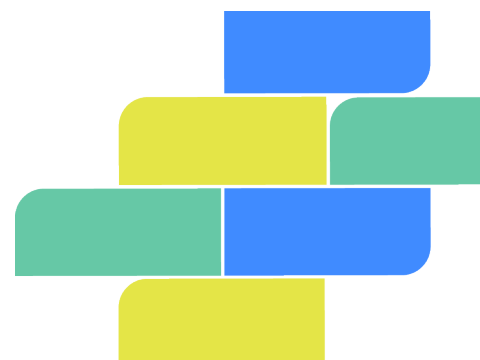
When thinking about alternative uses for these spaces, what should they be used for? Select all that apply.



Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 November - 2 December 2024).
Sample size = 2,002.
• Created with Datawrapper

Reimagining department stores

Multiple new futures have already been imagined for the spaces vacated by the decline of department stores, which mirror the public’s view of what should be done in these spaces. These different visions for department stores often focus on creating a more mixed-use space, combining retail with other activities that can reinstate footfall to high streets and town centres, and a greater focus on experience, which can encourage people to stay on the high street for longer. For example, Bobby’s, a former independent department store in Bournemouth that was later absorbed by Debenhams, has reopened as a destination space, combining retail with food and drink, arts and culture, and co-working spaces. The reinvention of Bobby’s has sought to overcome the impact of the dominance of online retail, stating that: ‘Rather than compete with the internet, Bobby’s aims to offer things it can’t provide.’⁷



Elsewhere, former department stores have been adapted to meet other needs within local communities, including advances into public service delivery. As part of Legal and General Investment Management's strategy to create a more diverse community and shopping destination in the Dolphin Shopping Centre in Poole, part of the centre's former Beales department store has been transformed into an NHS outpatient assessment clinic.⁸

Some have even sought to transform department stores to meet housing demand. Apartment Store is an award-winning proposal for a community-led housing scheme in a former department store in Taunton, Somerset. It was imagined by its designers 'to act as a defibrillator in increasingly hollowed-out town-centres', combining affordable homes with shared social and workspaces, and rooftop food growing.⁹ However, the prospect of housing as a widespread answer to the problem of empty department stores remains faint: purpose-built department store buildings are widely considered unsuitable for redevelopment as housing, with their lack of natural light, poor circulation and the historic use of hazardous building materials such as asbestos. There are also concerns that the demolition or redevelopment of department stores to make way for new housing risks both the loss of the architectural and historic value of department stores, as well as their role in facilitating social interaction outside of the home.¹⁰

Community-led solutions

Communities across the country are also developing their own solutions to the decline of department stores, tackling both high street vacancy and the loss of these important social spaces. They are part of a wider movement of communities taking back their high streets, bringing new life to old buildings to strengthen their communities and keep money circulating in their local economies.

This report tells the stories of four community businesses which have transformed their once-loved local department stores and shopping spaces into mixed-use town centre hubs that bring people together and meet local needs. Accompanying these case studies, and drawing on insights from the people running these projects, the report captures some of the opportunities and challenges of community-led transformation of department stores, demonstrating that communities can provide a viable alternative for the future of these spaces, if they are appropriately supported. It also provides policy recommendations to enable more communities to create thriving civic high streets and to own and steward high street buildings.

While these are just four examples, they represent the capacity, imagination and drive that exists in communities across the country, who are creating new civic spaces in these national institutions. We hope these examples will inspire and evidence what is possible.



Case studies: How communities are reimagining department stores

These four case studies represent a snapshot of the activity of community businesses on the high street, and demonstrate the range of potential benefits from community reuse of vacant department stores and other complex retail spaces, such as shopping centres and arcades.

Three of these projects are located in former department stores in town centres, on a high street or main shopping street. Both Department and Haven Community Hub occupy the sites of former independent, family-owned department stores, and both continue to lease these spaces from their owners. Sparks is situated in a former Marks & Spencer, and their lease was obtained through an approach by a commercial agent. Dewsbury Arcade is situated in a listed Victorian shopping arcade, and is England's first community-run shopping centre, secured via a lease from the arcade's newest owners, Kirklees Council. The terms of their leases are varied, with the shortest being a one-year rolling lease and the longest a 40-year lease (see Table 1). Age Concern Southend, which runs the Haven Community Hub, is raising funds to purchase the building from its current owner.

Two of the organisations are constituted as charities, while one is a community interest company and another a community benefit society. Developing income from trading goods and services (including leasing parts of their space) is a crucial part of the business model of each of these projects, and they all reinvest profits into their assets and the wider community. These different governance structures have relative benefits and drawbacks which impact on their experience of repurposing department stores and other high street spaces. For example, charities are entitled to an 80% mandatory business rates exemption, which can ease the burden of the high rateable values of department stores, while community benefit societies and co-operatives can raise capital to invest in their assets through community shares.

Two of the organisations, Haven Community Hub and Sparks, are currently trading and open to the public. Department is currently undergoing a significant renovation project designed with Turner Works, the architects behind projects such as Peckham Levels, which transformed a south London multi-storey car park into an arts, enterprise and community space. It plans to open its doors again in early 2025. Dewsbury Arcade is currently undergoing major regeneration works, funded by its owners, Kirklees Council, with support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, as part of their ten-year, £80-million town centre investment plan. The Arcade Group will curate tenants within the



arcade’s retail spaces and manage community activities within the arcade, which will open to the public in autumn 2025.

Table 1. Ownership and lease type of the projects

Project	Lead organisation	Building ownership	Lease details
Department Ryde, Isle of Wight	Shademakers (community interest company)	Private owner	40-year lease Rent scaling up over time from a peppercorn rent to a commercial rent
Haven Community Hub Westcliff-on-Sea	Age Concern Southend-on-Sea (registered charity)	Private owner, raising funds to purchase the asset	20-year lease Commercial rent
Sparks Bristol	Artspace Lifespace and Global Goals Centre (registered charities)	Private owner	Rolling one-year lease Peppercorn rent
Dewsbury Arcade Dewsbury, West Yorkshire	The Arcade Group (community benefit society)	Local authority	Ten-year lease

As these case studies illustrate, the four projects offer a range of activities, services and opportunities for local people that are rooted in their understanding of what their communities want and need. They are blending aspects of the traditional department store experience, through retail space and cafes, with new uses such as engaging local people in health and wellbeing activity, promoting engagement with the arts and environmental sustainability, supporting local entrepreneurship, and providing support to older people and refugee communities. They are all taking steps to make these former retail spaces more inclusive and accessible to a broad audience, including offering activities and spaces which are free to use or available at a locally affordable rate. Doing so can help to bring a wider range of users to the high street, and in consequence increase engagement and spending with other local businesses.



Department

Ryde on the Isle of Wight has a rich cultural and artistic history - with one of the UK's oldest carnivals taking place in the town.

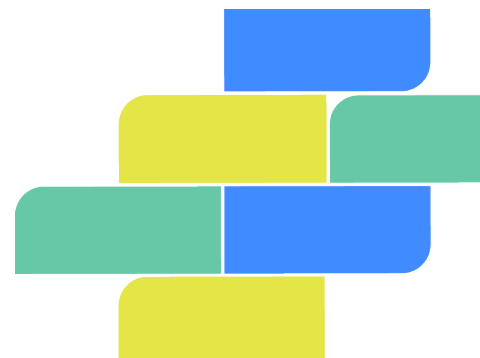
Shademakers UK are helping to tell the story of Ryde's creative past by restoring a 300-year-old former department store. They are very hopeful that the project will create pride in the area and bring more people to the town centre.



Many islanders have fond memories of the historic Elizabeth Packs department store. After the owner passed away, it was left empty for several years.

Sharon George, a resident and artist at local arts and carnival organisation Shademakers UK, had been walking her dog by the abandoned building every day, wondering what might happen to it.

During a conversation with a friend, Sharon was invited to a tour. Her organisation Shademakers had been looking for a new workspace for their costume-making and community workshops. They



had a bold vision to reimagine the empty historic building and transform it into a vibrant multi-use hub for the whole community.

So together with Turner Works, a group of architects well-known for reusing and redesigning old buildings, Shademakers signed the ten-year lease for the building – now called Department.

Shademakers are transforming Department into a place for residents and tourists alike - with arts and culture at its heart. Department, opening in February 2025, will host community activities, workshops, exhibitions and events – hoping to attract 500,000 visitors each year.

Creating a destination space in Ryde

Sharon is not shy in sharing her love for living in Ryde. But she also recognises the unique challenges of the community:

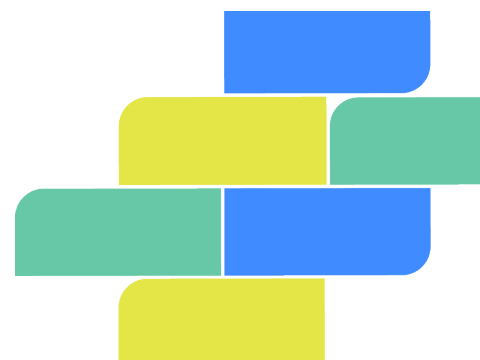
“During the summer, we have almost two million visitors to the Isle of Wight. An island community has a lot of differences to mainland UK – at Shademakers we work with many people who have never left the Isle of Wight or experienced arts and culture.”

Shademakers have faced enormous logistical challenges, including the rising cost of materials. Despite this, they raised £2.5 million through grants including from the Arts Council, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and Historic England’s Ryde High Streets Heritage Action Zone. This money has been used to carry out major repairs and make sure the historic building is accessible for everyone.

“When we moved into the building, we discovered a lot of information dating back to the 1700s. All sorts of makers were based in the building, so we started thinking about how to tell its fascinating story and the heritage of Ryde.”

- Sharon George, Shademakers

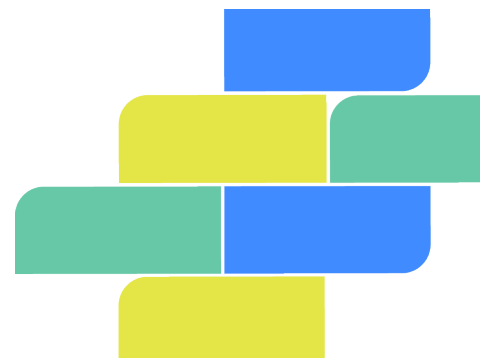
Department will help people to connect with others, get creative and play a role in the fabric of the building.



“The building will host our workshops and skills training for people of all ages – whether it’s sewing with textiles or sustainable materials, theatre skills and event production. We’ll also be offering upholstery and wood restoration classes, inviting people to help us restore furniture – while saving money renovating this huge building!”

- Sharon George, Shademakers

More than 40 community organisations are involved in the creation of Department, including local theatre companies, youth groups, local artists and a sustainable fashion collective. The vision for Department also includes a shop for local makers to sell their work. Income will also be generated through many other activities – the theatre/cinema space, dance and fitness classes, the sound studio, four artist studios, a cafe and bar as well as a hire space for local communities and events.



Preparing for reopening next year

While the final building is still being developed, Sharon and her team have spent months showcasing their art in the window displays – from underwater scenes, to large red and white roses celebrating the England football team, and cardboard sculptures.

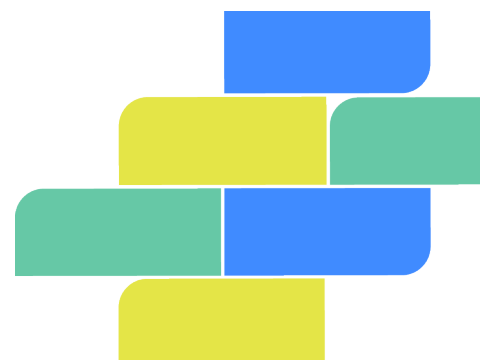
“We had a lady, walking past our colourful shop window display, who said she felt so proud to live in Ryde because of what we’re doing. When people feel proud to live somewhere, it makes a difference to how they respond to everything. If there is something interesting happening, the community will come to the town centre. All because of arts and creativity.

“When I was a teenager, I went to the high street because of the experience. People need buildings that they can feel a part of. And a lot of that's been just stripped away from our towns and our communities. Some people need to leave their houses, to speak to people, be creative and see colour.”

- Sharon George, Shademakers

Shademakers have already brought £4 million into the town - and the reimagined building will bring in further economic benefits for Ryde. Department is working with local contractors, creating jobs and helping money to stay on the island.

Department initially took on a short-term lease to secure the necessary investment it needed. Now, they have agreed to a 40-year lease with the private landlord to “safeguard the space as a cultural building for the next 40 years”.



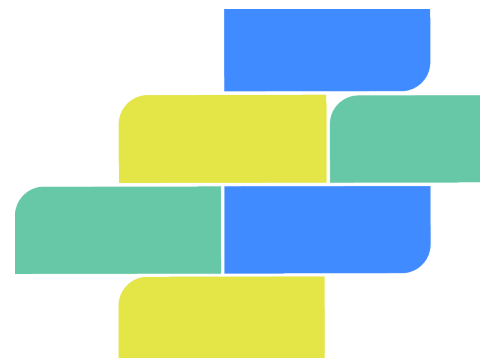
Haven Community Hub

Westcliff-on-Sea is a suburb of the popular seaside city of Southend-on-Sea. Westcliff is undergoing an exciting transformation, emerging as a thriving hub for businesses and a vibrant destination for the Southend community. Central to this is the community-led revival of a historic department store.



Once known as the Bond Street of Essex, the main shopping area of Westcliff-on-Sea is Hamlet Court Road. The much-loved department store Havens, selling homewares, housewares, gifts, perfumes, cutlery and glassware, established a home here for almost 100 years. Havens helped the area to develop into a strong independent retail area, creating places for people from across southeast England to visit, live and work.

But Westcliff declined during the economic recessions of the 1970s and 1980s. When Havens closed in 2018, it was the only independent department store remaining in Southend – an all too familiar story for many of the UK's changing high streets.



But Mike Nicholson from local charity Age Concern Southend was determined to make sure this Grade II listed building did not remain empty. The building is situated in one of the most deprived parts of Westcliff, and Mike is passionate about using the space to help regenerate the area.

Mike said:

“We had this idea of creating a one-stop hub, housing all of the facilities and services needed by local older people, their families and the whole community.

“Nigel and Paul Havens, the owners of Havens, who we have a very good ongoing supportive relationship with, told us they were planning to close because they were earning more from the internet business than the store. Havens wanted to do something good for the community, so that’s how Haven Community Hub was born.”

The Hub experienced delays with obtaining planning consent to convert the listed building for community use. Haven Community Hub eventually opened in 2019, rented to the charity from the Havens family on a 20-year lease.

The community are really proud of the reuse of the former department store and how its place in Westcliff has been preserved. Mike said:

“A lot of people have got fond memories of Havens and are delighted that it's still open to the community. It's amazing to see so many people who used to come to the Havens shop now use the Hub.”

Serving the community through a diverse offer

The Hub is open to all ages and offers a huge range of activities, including free counselling for older people, choirs, coffee and conversation sessions, tai chi, therapy treatments, and even a charity shop. Its 30 exercise and activity classes are priced at £3 to £10 per session, recognising that people from deprived areas want an affordable offer.

The Hub generates income through a range of services, including a dementia day care centre which is open five days a week. This provides space for 12 people and offers a high ratio of staff and volunteers to clients. The large cafe is rented out to a local business and offers affordable meals for the community.

Council services are also hosted in the building, including additional practical and emotional support as well as signposting for people living with dementia and their carers.

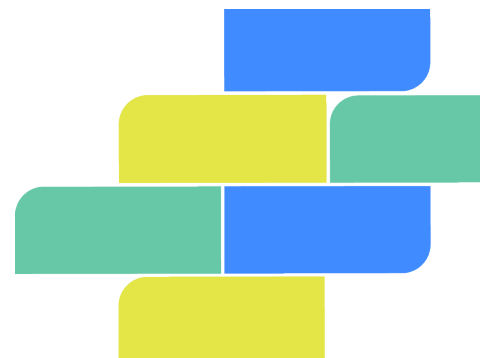


The Hub recognised the challenges the Covid-19 pandemic brought to how the space was used. They adapted to welcome a wider range of people from the whole community.

“During the lockdown, when older people couldn’t come out, younger groups could. We started doing things with them and parents. We even ran a seaside circus and kids’ martial arts classes, which are still running today. There’s a whole cross-section of people using this space.”

- *Mike Nicholson, Haven Community Hub*

Their large cafe is often used by local networks, charities and small businesses who otherwise couldn’t afford to access a space like this – including the MS Society, a mother and toddler group, as well as a homelessness support group.



Talking about the incredible impact of the Hub for people's physical and mental wellbeing, Mike said:

"A 92-year-old man told us we saved his life. His wife died and his whole world collapsed. He started coming to us as a volunteer and his whole world changed. People love what we do here – we've had people travel from other areas because there's nothing else like it".

Just the beginning for local regeneration

With around 3,600 people visiting the former department store each month, the rest of Hamlet Court Road has benefited from increased footfall. A central aim of the Hub is the wider regeneration of the area.

"Westcliff is following other parts of Southend, it's really changing. We believe the Hub is pivotal to this happening and that it has already made a huge impact to the area. A lot of people have said that while they're at the Hub, they visit other shops, cafes, restaurants and pubs along Hamlet Court Road. There used to be quite a lot of empty shops here when the area started declining. There are now very few, if any."

- *Mike Nicholson, Haven Community Hub*

Age Concern Southend is keen to secure the long-term future of the Hub on Hamlet Court Road. They hope to secure funding from the Community Ownership Fund. The continuation of some form of funding for community ownership is really important to the charity and would release the funds they currently spend on rent. Mike said:

"Failure to obtain a grant from the Community Ownership Fund would make it very difficult for the charity to raise the £1.2 million needed to acquire the Havens building. Under the terms of our lease, our rent could also increase to up to £150,000 per year. This would affect our financial sustainability and may lead to the Hub sadly being closed."

Five thousand people recently supported their bid to the fund, including the former national High Street Taskforce, who said the project was a fantastic example of repurposing a retail building and local regeneration. Haven Community Hub is now part of a Westcliff initiative called Hamlet Court Calling, which has been supported by the High Street Taskforce and Southend City Council. The initiative, which brings together traders, residents and community groups, also regularly hosts their meetings at the Hub.



Sparks

When a flagship department store closed in Bristol, two local organisations took on a mission to revive the building and help regenerate the city centre. Sparks, the reimagined department store, opened in 2023. With more than 750,000 visitors to date, they've made a significant impact on their community by creating a vibrant space for everyone and attracting new people and businesses to the area.



A Marks & Spencer store had been a fixture in Broadmead, Bristol for many generations. It closed in 2022 due to changing shopping habits, after more than 70 years in the city centre. A Debenhams store opposite the building closed around the same time. With another local shopping centre, The Galleries, set to be demolished, many in the community worried about what the former Marks & Spencer store and the surrounding area would become.

“While there's been a decline of people shopping in Bristol city centre, there are still a lot of people living in the area including students. The footfall is very vibrant.”

- Kathryn Chiswell Jones, Artspace Lifespace



Artspace Lifespace specialises in bringing old buildings back into use for the community in Bristol – even taking on a former police station. But they had never taken on a department store. Artspace Lifespace collaborated with the Global Goals Centre to create Sparks.

Creating a cultural destination space

Sparks is a unique, interactive department store for everyone, based around experience and not just retail.

“Sparks is so much more than just a shopping centre. We’re a one-stop shop for sustainability and creativity, engaging the public in a really practical way – without them having to spend money. It’s somewhere that they can explore in the city centre and hopefully learn something along the way.”

- *Jenny Foster, Global Goals Centre*

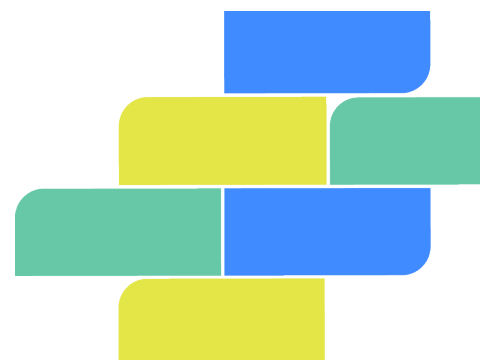
The building’s history as a department store has been captured through how it is presented. Sparks offers a Department of Gifts where you can buy ethical gifts from independent businesses, a Department of Fashion with second hand clothing, and a Department of Discovery offering events and education workshops to inspire learning and action on climate, nature and equality. There’s also a Department of Imagination with community hire space, a Department of Food and Drinks with a cafe – and so much more!

“We tried to figure out what we could do on the ground floor that would welcome people in, particularly those communities that might feel an art centre isn’t for them. If you look at the people coming into our building, it’s so diverse. It’s a place for the community that otherwise wouldn’t exist in Broadmead. It’s a place of welcome and a place of refuge.”

- *Kathryn Chiswell Jones, Artspace Lifespace*

Building local opportunities through trading

Sparks worked with more than 50 local organisations and creatives to co-design the space, building an experience that truly reflects the needs and aspirations of the community.



“Every single part of Sparks is a collaboration – it involves hundreds of people. We’ve tried to give opportunities to people who wouldn’t necessarily have had opportunities, including migrant and refugee entrepreneurs.”

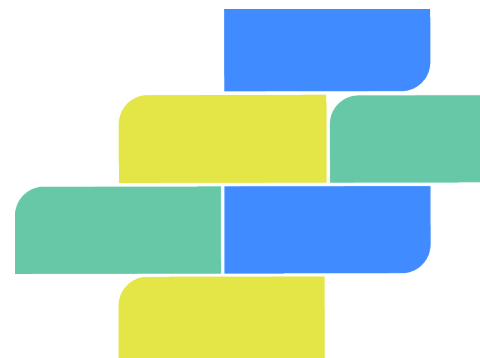
- Jenny Foster, Global Goals Centre



A trader, Calcifer Cole talked about the impact that Sparks has had on their business:

“When I started my little business in 2021, I was finishing university, and I was told by the head of my course that my work would never amount to anything. Within a month of trading at Sparks, my stock sold out, and now I’m one of their top three earners! It’s amazed me and given me so much confidence that I didn’t have before.”

By drawing people into the space and providing a diverse range of activities and services, Sparks is tackling local vacancy rates and bringing new life and energy back to the city centre. Sparks has also generated increased footfall and vibrancy for other businesses in the area.



“Having more imaginative uses of high streets is going to be the way they survive and thrive. Exciting, vibrant projects invite people to an area and benefit local businesses.

“We've been told by the local Business Improvement District (BID) that they see Sparks as a real asset and catalyst for the regeneration of Broadmead. The fact that we're offering something unique and experiential, rather than just another generic retail space, is helping to attract people back to the area.”

- Kathryn Chiswell Jones, *Artspace Lifespace*

Sparks have also been told that their work has influenced the Bristol City Centre Local Plan refresh. The council has taken note of what they've created and is looking to include similar spaces into their future plans. Sparks is also working with other communities in Torbay and Newport to help them set up a similar initiative in either new or existing community buildings.

Sparks is currently confirmed to stay open until at least Christmas 2025. They have a rolling one-year lease but hope to remain in Bristol for the long term.



Dewsbury Arcade

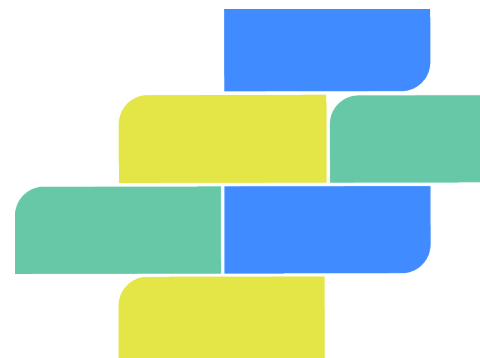
In 2016, a Victorian Arcade in Dewsbury closed after the number of shoppers fell drastically. Dewsbury Arcade remained empty for seven years. Now, a community is determined to refurbish the Grade II listed site and inspire further investment in Dewsbury. They want to create the UK's first community-run shopping arcade and pave the way for the transformation of the town centre.



Chris Hill, an established social entrepreneur, has helped set up the Arcade Group, a community business leading the rejuvenation of the historic building.

“Dewsbury is a poor town. It's one of those towns that has been going steadily downhill, with Saturday footfall decreasing rapidly over the last ten years or so. Even our Wetherspoons closed, which says a lot.”

- Chris Hill, Dewsbury Arcade



Dewsbury's commercial vacancy rates are double the national average, while its employment rates are [lower than the national average](#). But the Arcade Group are hopeful they can help play a role in the broader revival of the town centre by transforming the empty, historic arcade.

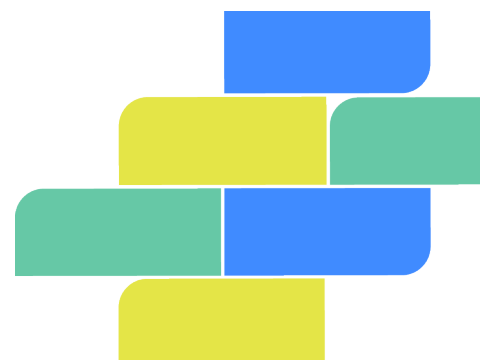
Repurposing a historic space

The Arcade, which was built in 1899 with its beautiful roof and ironwork, is close to the hearts of many Dewsbury people. It was once a popular town centre thoroughfare.

But after falling footfall, poor management and lack of investment by absentee owners, the Dewsbury Arcade emptied out in 2011 and finally closed in 2016. It crossed Chris's radar in 2020.

“The possibility for Dewsbury Arcade was introduced to me by someone I'd worked with on a pub community buyout in Leeds. He said there's an empty arcade next to me in Dewsbury, why don't we do the same thing here?”

- Chris Hill, Dewsbury Arcade



Chris specialises in town centre regeneration and collaborates with residents and business owners to develop and run new community businesses. Chris said:

“For the last 25 years, I’ve been getting together with groups who fall in love with a building, helping them form a cooperative, developing the business and the building. Then after a few years, the cooperative takes over and continues to run it.”

Chris collaborated with eight business leaders who lived or worked in the town and helped to pitch the idea of an independent shopping centre to the council, which was already in the process of buying the historic arcade from a landlord.

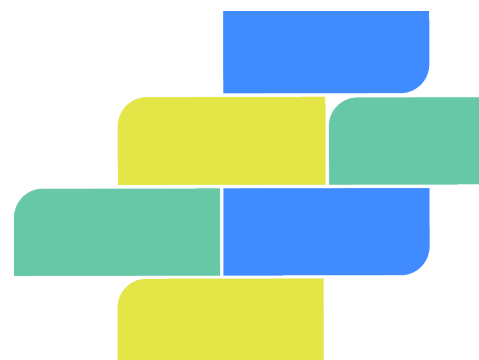
In 2020, Kirklees Council bought the once much-loved arcade. Once opened in autumn 2025, the shopping centre will be managed by the Arcade Group as a community business run independently from the council. They have brought together people with business experience, energy and imagination to create a popular Arcade that they hope will never close again. Together, a steering group of community activists, pub owners, developers, builders, an arts company, a surveyor and a lawyer will help run the asset in the long term.

Resident Natalie Liddle runs Eye Wood Vintage in Dewsbury and is a member of the Arcade’s Board. She said:

“The Arcade redevelopment will be the first of a series of regeneration strategies that will revitalise the economy and give the community a town it can really be proud of again.

“I got involved as I’ve been based in Dewsbury since 2012 and despite the decline, I love it here. I live here, my business is here, I shop here and I socialise here. The people are kind and friendly and there’s a real hope and enthusiasm for the changes that need to come. I really wanted to contribute to making Dewsbury a better place for everyone – somewhere safer, more engaging and welcoming that celebrates the strengths the town has to offer. The Arcade will be the catalyst for the town’s renaissance and I’m proud and excited to be part of this journey.”

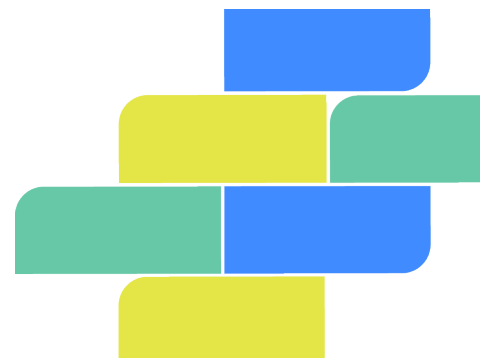
The Arcade will be a springboard for young entrepreneurs, with a mix of retail, activity and culture. It will also work with other Dewsbury projects and keep the money local. It will have 16 exciting and affordable small shops and four larger shops. The second floor above the shops will offer six studios for artists, offices or events.



Talking about the vision over its ten-year lease, Chris said:

“We’re going to focus on speciality food and drink, clothing and the like from independent businesses that are already online and capable of building their own crowd. The good thing about the shops being so small is that rent for those units we will have is cheap – £100 a week. It’s the sort of thing a new business can try. We want to provide places where people want to visit, providing a diversity of shops.”

It is hoped that the Arcade will create tens of local jobs and generate thousands of pounds in revenue for independent businesses. The Arcade has already had interest from various prospective tenants, including a local bakery, a heritage clothing store, a luxury accessories brand, a cafe, a shop selling gifts made by students from Kirklees College and local schools, as well as an artist co-operative.



Can an old Arcade drive regeneration?

The Arcade is just one part of revitalising Dewsbury's town centre. By bringing the much-loved arcade back to life, this community business will make better use of the space that might otherwise remain derelict.

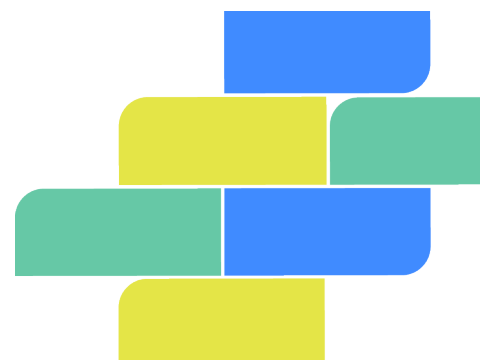
Talking about how the ability to increase footfall in the rest of the town centre will impact the success of the Arcade, Chris said:

“It became obvious that unless we sort out the whole of the Dewsbury town centre, the Arcade will crash and burn after a couple of years. If we're going to break this cycle of empty shops, we've got to get people back into the town centre. We've got to get people shopping.”

Working with the Arts House, the Arcade Group have also brokered a deal with the large shopping centre next door to the Arcade, and are currently filling the empty shops there too. They have also been trialling events in the town centre, funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, to bring in new people and explore what could also work at the Arcade. The Group also organised Dewsbury's first food festival in years, which proved very successful.

Generating additional excitement and investment in the area, the Arcade Group are also working with Kirklees Council Markets Team to source tenants into the Market, Arcade and other town centre vacant units. The Group has also created a business network focused on attracting people to Dewsbury, in liaison with the Chamber of Trade.

Dewsbury Arcade is highlighting the need for Dewsbury and other towns to align their shops with local need. Chris thinks there should be a dedicated role for someone to “curate the town centre” – finding new tenants, bringing in successful business from elsewhere and leading the activation of the whole area – not just the Arcade. He said: “That's the missing piece.”



Analysis: The opportunities and challenges of community reuse of department stores

Opportunities

Benefits of flexible space and town centre locations

Occupying former department stores can have a number of benefits for community groups. Interviewees noted that the large, flexible floorspace of these assets can be configured to accommodate different types of community activity and enables the co-location of different initiatives, sparking collaboration across community groups, and enabling a wide range of entrepreneurial activities. For example, each department of Sparks has been developed with different local partners to offer different activities and services, each with a focus on sustainability education. By facilitating these partnerships, the lead organisations, Artspace Lifespace and the Global Goals Centre, have seen new activities arise beyond what they initiated. Similarly, these large assets can give local entrepreneurs a foothold in brick and mortar, where they might otherwise only be able to trade online, bringing new businesses to the town centre and creating entrepreneurial communities – this is a central aspiration for Dewsbury Arcade.

The high street and town centre locations of these assets can increase the visibility of community businesses, make their offer more accessible to local people, and draw in new audiences to engage with their work. The Shademakers view Department as a space to bring their work to the community and encourage local people to get involved in the arts and culture. Before moving into a department store, they had previously used warehouses and commercial buildings away from the town centre, limiting passing traffic and engagement with their work. Since taking on the space, they have used creative window displays to spark local interest in how the space will be used, and to get people to pay attention to this previously vacant building.



“We're so visible in this high street building. But that's actually great, because you connect straight away with the people. We've got a bus stop straight outside one of our windows.”

- Sharon George, *Shademakers*

Haven Community Hub was launched in a former department store because its founders, Age Concern Southend, wanted to open a one-stop service hub in an easy-to-access location. The town centre location of the department store makes it easy for local people to access, including by public transport. Many of the interviewees have also observed the impact of community businesses on the high street on surrounding local businesses. Visitors to Haven Community Hub say they are likely to also visit other local businesses when they visit the hub. The Strand, a shopping centre in Bootle, has similarly seen footfall to other shops increase from people engaging with activities run by community businesses in the shopping centre.¹¹ Community businesses also help to keep money in the local economy by spending with local suppliers. On average about half (51%) of community businesses' expenditure nationally in the past year was spent on local suppliers and more than a quarter (27%) of their suppliers are other community businesses.¹²

The informality of these spaces can also draw in people who might not otherwise choose to engage with these types of projects. The leaders of Sparks have found that since footfall in Bristol's Broadmead is quite diverse, they have seen a wider range of people engaging with their activities than a sustainability education project might typically attract, which has given them an opportunity to reach out to lots of different audiences. They have also been working with local community champions, who are leaders in Bristol's diverse communities, to shape their offer to be widely inclusive, and have also designed spaces in the department store to support neurodiverse people to engage with the project.

However, a town centre location can also have disadvantages. The benefits of incidental footfall to community businesses are dependent on surrounding units being occupied, especially if a community business is located within a shopping centre or other covered structure. Primeyarc, an initiative of Great Yarmouth-based arts charity originalprojects, which is located in a former Debenhams in a shopping centre, has seen a decline in people finding them accidentally after the closure of the nearby Wilkos.¹³ Additionally, anti-social behaviour in the town centre can have adverse impacts on community businesses as it may discourage people from using and spending time in these areas.

Contribution to creating a civic high street

By creating an experience-led offer, these community businesses are helping to revive the civic role of the high street and the role that department stores once played in creating social connection. This reflects the wider contributions of community business: 98% of community businesses are



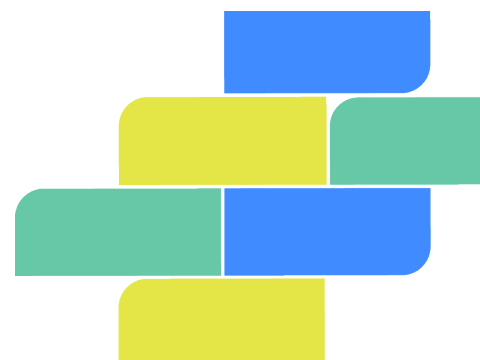
helping to create community cohesion, 97% are reducing social isolation and 96% are helping to foster greater community pride and empowerment.¹⁴

“We really think that high streets need to change, to have more of a civic role again, and that they need to support this more distributive, regenerative, circular economy. So part of that will be providing this essential space for communities, for cultural activity, for experiences and the type of things that draw people together.”

- Kathryn Chiswell Jones, *Artspace Lifespace*



Interviewees noted that there is significant demand for a place on the high street to socialise and spend time without spending money. Both Haven Community Hub and Sparks offer spaces where people can meet free of charge, and use their cafes to provide a place where people can sit, socialise and relax. Following its refurbishment, Department will also open a cafe space to the public. Elsewhere, community businesses are responding to this demand for free-to-use space by setting up Public Living Rooms. Developed by Camerados, this initiative aims to provide free, informal communal spaces in public areas that allow strangers to meet and come together. For



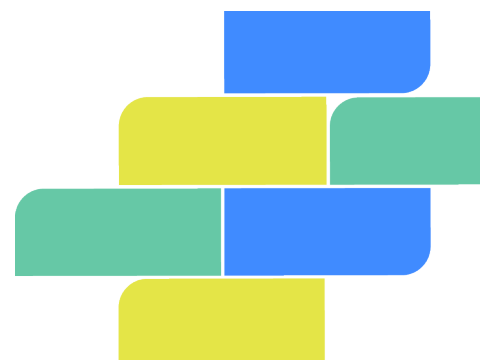
example, Hastings Commons has set up the Common Room in Eagle House, for people in Hastings to use and enjoy.¹⁵

The reopening of department store cafes provides space for people to meet with friends, reflecting the important role of cafes and restaurants as social spaces in the heyday of department stores. But the informal nature of these spaces can also help people to meet others that they might not encounter in their day-to-day lives, and to get some company or support. For example, while providing support and services for older adults, Haven Community Hub aims to be accessible to the whole community, which can lead to meetings of older and younger members of the community, who may not interact elsewhere. Interviewees pointed out that these effects cannot be replicated through online shopping.

Additionally, by bringing department stores back into use, community businesses are giving people back their shared sense of what makes their place unique, and are restoring civic pride:

“People need buildings that they can feel a part of. And a lot of that's been just stripped away from our towns and our places and our community...”

- Sharon George, Shademakers



For these community businesses, the heritage of their spaces is an active part of how they are being used today. Shademakers has tracked the use of the Department site back to the 1700s when it was used by local makers for activities such as carpentry. They are making this heritage part of the building's future by repairing old furniture for the space, and giving local people the chance to learn these skills. During the redevelopment of Dewsbury Arcade, the Arcade Group has been running a pop-up shop, inviting people to learn about the space's heritage to get people invested in its revival.

Interviewees noted that the reuse of these spaces often evokes strong memories of their past use, and that local people are glad to see them being used again:

'I think it does bring back people to the area. In our case, it's amazing the number of people who use the place now who used to come to the Haven shop. It was the sort of shop you go to at Christmas to buy a present for someone, or you buy a wedding present. And that's why, I think it ultimately declined, because you'd go in there, look at something, and then you go on the internet and work out how much you could get it cheaper, right? Most things these days, I suppose. Certainly a lot of people have got fond memories of it, and are delighted that it's still being open to the community and used for what it is.'

- *Mike Nicholson, Age Concern Southend*

Throughout 2025, Power to Change will be working with a cohort of community businesses to further explore the role of communities in transitioning towards a civic model for the high street. Our Community Led High Street Innovators will test innovative approaches that help communities take ownership of their high streets and have a greater say in the governance of their town centres. This will help us deepen our understanding of how community business can diversify the high street offer and reinstate spaces for social connection on the high street.

Engagement with local regeneration initiatives

Interviewees also mentioned that their projects are connecting and contributing to wider high street and town centre regeneration. As noted above, the vitality of the area surrounding these community-led spaces can impact on their success, by creating or decreasing footfall and accidental encounters with their work. The Arcade Group has recognised the importance of the wider town centre regeneration of Dewsbury to the success of the arcade, and so has initiated a wider programme of town centre activation using UK Shared Prosperity funding from Kirklees Council. This is helping to increase footfall to the town centre and providing proof of concept for the types of activities they may one day run from the arcade. The organisation is aiming to mobilise a wider group of people to make a difference in their town centre:



“We try and get everyone involved. Try and lift the optimism, lift the activism.”

- Chris Hill, *The Arcade Group*

Chris also sees a role for the organisation in curating the high street offer, to ensure it is diverse, dynamic and responsive to local need. Interviewees highlighted that there is a lack of opportunities for community businesses to have a say in the governance of their high streets and town centres, and to facilitate this shift to a more civic high street. Being an anchor organisation on the high street can position community businesses effectively to play this role – so long as they are given a seat at the table. More broadly, fewer than a third of community businesses feel that they are encouraged, by their local authorities or private sector high street stakeholders, to play an active role in the making of strategic decisions about the high street – though there is clear appetite to do so. Three-quarters of community businesses say influencing local decisions is a priority for them.¹⁶

Haven Community Hub is also contributing to town centre regeneration in Westcliff-on-Sea, as part of Hamlet Court Calling, a project run by residents, traders and community groups to facilitate the area’s regeneration. It has been supported by Southend Council and experts from the Government’s former High Streets Taskforce – which particularly praised the work of Haven Community Hub.

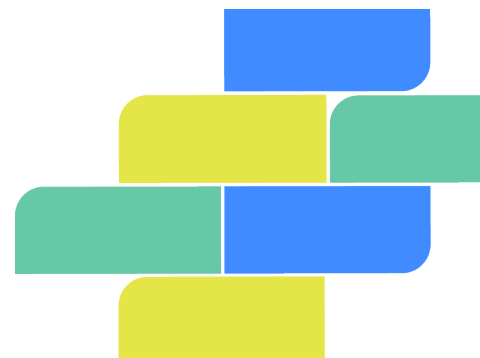
Sparks has helped to inspire a recognition of the role of community use in reviving the high street in Bristol City Council’s updated local plan:

“A time of change in the retail sector has seen the take up of high street units by new commercial and community uses as well as independent businesses, which has led to a varied service, leisure, evening and nighttime economy offer in many centres.

To maintain the ongoing success of these centres, the local plan proposes to recognise and support their role, enabling them to diversify in a way which keeps them at the heart of their local communities”.¹⁷

Sparks received a vacant commercial property grant from Bristol City Council, which paid for repairs and security for the building. They have also received goodwill and in-kind support from other local businesses who recognise the value they generate by reanimating vacant spaces. The local business improvement district has been particularly supportive of the project because of the impact the closures of the Marks & Spencer and a nearby Debenhams have had on other local businesses.

Each of these community businesses has engaged with publicly-funded regeneration initiatives in their area. Both Department and Dewsbury Arcade have benefitted from funding for heritage-led regeneration. Department’s first grant was through Architectural Heritage Fund’s Transforming Places programme. Both have been involved with Historic England Heritage Action Zones in their



area, a government-funded programme to create the conditions for economic growth and improve the quality of life in historic places in England.¹⁸ Dewsbury Arcade is situated within the Dewsbury Living Market Heritage Action Zone, with Department part of Ryde's High Street Heritage Action Zone. Both have noted that participation in the programme helped them to identify funders – they each went on to secure National Lottery Heritage Funding – and to look to other places for inspiration.

In addition to securing Shared Prosperity Fund to support high street activation, the Arcade Group has also made attempts to engage with Dewsbury's Long-Term Plan – a ten-year, £20-million funding programme for select towns across the UK, introduced by the Conservative Government in October 2024. However, they have found that the design of the programme does not effectively enable a bottom-up and community-led approach to town centre regeneration. They have also observed significant pressure locally to spend this investment on town centre security to police anti-social behaviour, rather than tackling its root causes, such as run-down buildings and a lack of local engagement with the town centre.

Age Concern Southend also submitted an application to the Community Ownership Fund, to secure funding to help them purchase the former Haven's department store and secure its long-term future as a vibrant community hub. However, due to the election and the freeze on this funding, their asset purchase has been left in limbo.

Challenges

Lease conditions and building repair

Community businesses have also highlighted challenges associated with taking on department stores and other high street buildings. In 2024, 60% of community businesses felt that barriers prevent them from taking over the running of vacant spaces on the high street – these tend to be financial and administrative in nature.¹⁹

Beyond the limitations of purpose-built department stores, such as a lack of natural light and outdoor space, they noted the significant repair and maintenance requirements of former department stores. Some occupy post-war buildings where the use of asbestos limits the options for reconfiguring the space. Many also noted that they had to carry out works to make the spaces more accessible, such as by adding lifts to upper floors.

The leasing conditions imposed on community businesses can also present a challenge. Some of these organisations have repair and maintenance leases, which make them financially responsible for any works required to make their building safe for use. This can be a particular challenge where organisations are aiming to revive derelict buildings that require significant works, and unexpected



costs can put a significant strain on the already tight margins of community businesses. For example, once the refurbishment of the Department building was under way, they found much more significant structural issues than expected and had to raise an additional £500,000 to complete the required works.

“The lease that we entered is a full repair and maintenance lease. So we are responsible for all of the maintenance of a three-storey 1935 grade II listed building, which is not easy.”

- *Mike Nicholson, Age Concern Southend*



Security of tenure is also an issue when it comes to the upkeep of these spaces. Community businesses with a meanwhile or short-term lease may be hesitant to invest significantly in improving their space, particularly where the asset owners do not have a long-term vision for the asset or assets are awaiting redevelopment. Interviewees from an arts charity said their 30-day rolling lease made their tenancy feel ‘precarious’, and they have struggled to attract investment into the project to complete necessary energy efficiency improvements.²⁰ Additionally, community



businesses will generate new streams of income through their occupation of these assets, which are likely to be lost if a short-term lease is not renewed.

Financing community assets

In addition to income from trading and from regeneration initiatives (see page 47) community businesses access many other forms of finance to deliver high street regeneration. For example, the Arcade Group has raised funds through a community share offer, with contributions from more than 200 members. Nonetheless, accessing the right forms of funding to develop and manage these spaces remains a significant challenge for community businesses.

Interviewees highlighted that while project specific funding is often available, it can be challenging to access the flexible revenue funding that allows people to dedicate the time to getting community-led ideas off the ground:

“It's those slightly risk-taking, not too specific grant pots that are so useful.”

- *Chris Hill, Arcade Group*



Security of tenure also presents a challenge to accessing investment. Interviewees note that some trusts and foundations look for projects to have leases of five to ten years to be eligible for larger funding opportunities, or longer for capital funding, so those on a meanwhile lease miss out.

While community asset ownership can address these challenges, the cost of purchasing a high street asset can be prohibitive for community businesses, particularly in urban areas like Bristol where asset values may be high. In order to help community businesses access money at the scale and pace needed to compete with the private sector, Power to Change has developed a proposal for a British High Street Investment Vehicle. Capitalised by public money, social and private investment, this agile fund would use local intelligence to purchase strategic assets that can be transferred into community ownership over time and with support.²¹

At a local level, councils can also facilitate asset ownership through community asset transfer and long-term leasing. In Dewsbury, the Arcade Group see having a council purchase important heritage assets and lease them to community groups, who cannot afford the up-front cost of purchasing these buildings, as a more democratic model that prevents these assets from being privatised. This way, even if the community use of these spaces fails, they will revert back to public ownership.

Some interviewees also mentioned the high cost of business rates and utilities associated with running a department store as a source of concern. Shademakers previously qualified for discretionary rates relief because they used an industrial building, but their high street space has a higher rateable value. Inflation has also had a significant impact on community businesses and the cost of regenerating department stores. Plans for the renovation of Department started in 2019, so as inflation rose, the plans had to be adapted, and the costs of the project scaled up.

These businesses reflect the changing demand for high street property and shifting nature of what is being delivered on the high street (including very diverse use of spaces that were once primarily for retail), which may not be accurately reflected within the rateable values of these properties. Nor is their role in stimulating the social and economic life of the high street reflected in the rates levied.

In addition to experiencing challenges with the cost of business rates, some of these community businesses have noted the use of 'soul stripping' or 'constructive vandalism' – the intentional stripping out of vacant assets by their owners to remove them from the rating list – in assets in their place. This contributes to the cycle of decline on the high street, and makes it more difficult and costly for communities to restore these assets to use.

“When these spaces are left empty, derelict, it encourages crime in the area. It encourages vandalism. And... it doesn't feel safe.”

- *Kathryn Chiswell Jones, Artspace Lifespace*



Policy context and recommendations

High street policy context

Bringing life back to ailing high streets has been a policy priority for successive governments, though to date there has been no specific policy intervention to tackle the decline of department stores, or to address their vacancy. The Conservative Government launched a Plan for High Streets in 2018 which allocated £675 million to improving town centre infrastructure and supporting high street redevelopment through the Future High Streets Fund.²² The Plan also introduced business rates discounts for small retailers. In response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, this relief was also extended to businesses in the leisure and hospitality sectors, with discounts continuing to the present day.²³

As well as further funding for place-based regeneration through its levelling up agenda, the Conservative Government also sought to tackle high street vacancy, making provisions in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 which would give councils new powers to compel property owners to bring empty high street properties back into use through rental auctions. Following the election, these High Street Rental Auctions came into effect in December 2024, though at present the legislation does not cover large complex assets such as department stores.²⁴ Our polling suggests that 60% of people think these new powers will make the state of the high street either a little or a lot better.²⁵

The Labour Government has also retained a focus on high street recovery. Prior to the general election, Labour published a five-point plan to support local high streets, which included plans to reform the business rates system and tackle high street vacancy.²⁶ The 2024 King's Speech included plans to introduce a Community Right to Buy in the English Devolution Bill, giving communities a right of first refusal to purchase assets of community value, including on the high street, when they come up for sale and extending the moratorium on the sale of these assets.²⁷ This landmark legislation has long been called for by Power to Change, community businesses and other sector allies. By making it easier for communities to buy the assets that matter to them, the Government will help to address the insecurity that many community businesses face while occupying high street locations. As part of this, the Government is also considering reform to Assets of Community Value regulations.

Following the Autumn Budget, the Government has also outlined the first steps in its plans for major reform of the business rates system, which will see it rebalance the business tax burden



between brick and mortar businesses and online retail, with an explicit focus on protecting the high street.²⁸ However, this initial discussion paper does not make reference to the role of community businesses and other community-led initiatives in reviving vacant units on the high street, and the impact that high rateable values have on this work.

Additionally, the Budget did not bring clarity on the future of the Community Ownership Fund, which has remained paused since May. This has left organisations like Haven Community Hub, which lodged a full application for funding prior to the freeze, with significant uncertainty about how they will secure the funding at scale needed to purchase their assets. As the experience of these community businesses demonstrates, access to funding for community ownership remains a major challenge. For communities to make use of a new Community Right to Buy, as well as measures like High Street Rental Auctions, dedicated resources for community ownership and community-led redevelopment of high street assets will be needed. Community businesses also want to see new powers and funding for community ownership become more strategic, enabling communities to take ownership of assets that can generate social, economic and environmental benefits and not just 'at risk' assets with a history of community use:

“So a Community Right to Buy would be fantastic, but not just about a Community Right to Buy for a pub or a building that has previously been used, but just that you notice a need in an area, and that you can get the funding to create what is needed in these areas.”

- Kathryn Chiswell Jones, *Artspace Lifespace*

The community businesses noted that local authorities also now have significant powers to tackle vacancy and revive the high street – including Compulsory Purchase powers and Community Asset Transfer, as well as the new High Street Rental Auctions. However, some were sceptical about whether local authorities have the financial capacity and risk appetite to help communities gain access to the high street, and to experiment with how they reuse former retail spaces.

Recommendations

As the examples of these four community businesses demonstrate, communities can offer a solution to the problem of vacant town centre spaces that no longer fit the retail-focused purpose for which they were designed. However, to do this, they will require a supportive policy landscape that favours a more mixed-use, experience-led vision for the high street.

This section outlines recommendations for government to back community business through policy and place-based investment. At this moment of political change, and with growing policy



momentum around high street rejuvenation and community ownership, this is a golden opportunity to enable communities to take back their high streets.

Beyond central government, community businesses also depend on the collaboration and support of local high street stakeholders, including their local councils, asset owners and other local businesses, to help them shift towards a more civic model for the high street and to unlock space for community ownership. Power to Change has explored the potential for community-led governance on the high street through our Community Improvement District Pilots and will be working to further understand how communities can tackle issues of ownership and governance on the high street with our cohort of Community Led High Street Innovators in 2025.²⁹

Creating a civic high street

1. Give communities the tools they need to take back the high street through a Civic High Streets Accelerator

To enable communities to revitalise their high streets and town centres through community leadership, ownership and economic development, government must implement a cohesive policy, funding and support framework. A Civic High Streets Accelerator would ensure communities can make best use of new powers and resources for community ownership to transform their high streets, by:

- Providing expert support for community-led regeneration, to help communities repurpose buildings like department stores, and to use the Community Right to Buy
- Creating opportunities for community-led governance, and a role in curating the high street offer
- Mapping existing funds in place, to ensure they are directed towards improving the high street
- Strategically informing the development of future regeneration funding and policy initiatives to support community-led work
- Boosting communities' local economic contribution through community ownership

2. Channel local growth and regeneration funding to support the creation of more civic high streets

As the new Government contemplates the design of future local growth and regeneration funding, and its own answer to levelling up, it should ensure these investments support communities to experiment with bringing new activities and offers to their high streets. As has been extensively documented, and echoed by these community businesses, it has often been challenging for community businesses to gain access to levelling up funding to support their ambitions.



Future funds should make it essential for councils to collaborate with those who know best what their communities need from their high streets and town centres – including community businesses – and should empower them to take action. Existing levelling up funds that have been carried forward by the new Government, such as the Long-Term Plan for Towns, should be redesigned to meet these principles and realign with existing and potential community-led regeneration projects.

3. Create a fairer model of business rates that rewards those who are restoring their high streets

The Government's review of business tax must not only address the imbalance between physical and online retail, but should also recognise the contributions of those who are bringing life back to the high street. While the Labour Government has already pledged to make business taxes for retail, leisure and hospitality businesses permanently lower, it should also recognise the role of community businesses through lowering the rates they pay – particularly where they are occupying spaces that might otherwise be left empty to decay further. As this paper demonstrates, the range of activities community businesses are bringing to the high street is diverse and might not always fall into one of the existing categories for relief, so community businesses may benefit from being recognised as a distinct asset class within the business rates system.

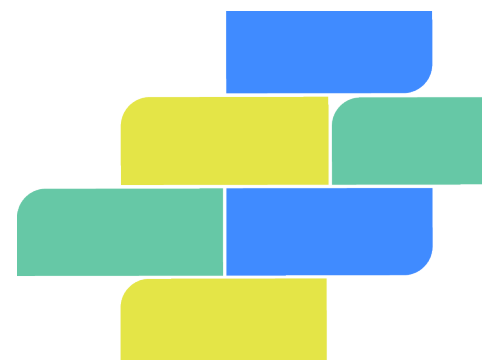
Conversely, government must be tougher on those who strip their assets to avoid paying their fair share of business rates, thereby perpetuating cycles of decline on their high streets. Penalties for 'soul stripping' could be used to reinvest in those businesses that are stewarding assets responsibly and helping to restore neglected buildings.

Supporting community ownership

4. Expand the scope of eligible assets under new high street regeneration and community ownership powers

As these case studies demonstrate, communities are using a diverse range of assets and locations to create social, economic and environmental benefits. Government's policy framework and support for community ownership should reflect the potential for communities to own and manage a range of assets, not just those that have been traditionally associated with community activity. To this end, government should take a more expansive view of the assets that communities may wish to develop.

Firstly, as recommended in the Power to Change report *Getting it right: Introducing and implementing a Community Right to Buy*, the definition of Assets of Community Value in the Localism Act should be updated to cover buildings or land that further the social, economic and/or environmental wellbeing and interests of the local community. It should also include assets that may perform this function in the future as well as those with an existing community use.³⁰ This would expand the scope of assets eligible under the Community Right to Buy, and make it easier for communities to use these powers to take ownership of former retail assets like department stores



and other high street spaces. Additionally, support for community ownership should extend beyond the 'at risk' assets supported by the Community Ownership Fund, to enable communities to proactively buy and develop assets to keep them in community hands.

Secondly, the High Street Rental Auctions legislation should be amended to include all commercial asset types within a high street (as designated by local authorities). This would enable communities and other high street stakeholders to use this power to tackle the challenge of long-term vacant department stores and other large-scale retail assets. Any future legislation to tackle high street vacancy should also prioritise making it possible for communities to identify and take on the assets which are most likely to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits locally.

5. Extend, expand and improve the funding for community ownership

The Community Ownership Fund (COF) has been a much-valued source of investment in community asset ownership and, as the story of Haven Community Hub demonstrates, has created significant demand from communities for funding and support to protect their assets through long-term community ownership. Following the conclusion of the COF, government should extend, expand and improve the funding available for community ownership to £1 billion over ten years. This should be drawn from a range of sources, including government grant, charitable foundations, social investment and Dormant Assets, with a government contribution of approximately £300 million over this period.

Some of this funding would be ringfenced to deliver capacity-building support, so more communities can take advantage of the opportunity of community ownership, and ensure these assets remain in stable community ownership for years to come.

6. Introduce a British High Street Investment Vehicle

Additionally, to boost community-led regeneration and tackle high street vacancy, a portion of this expanded fund would be dedicated to supporting the creation of a British High Street Investment Vehicle. This agile investment vehicle would support community-led high street regeneration by purchasing and restoring a diversified portfolio of vacant high street properties to be transferred into community ownership, over time and with support. Investing £100 million in government subsidy could crowd in a further £250 million in commercial and social purpose capital, providing a much-needed source of patient and flexible capital for community ownership on the high street and meet demand for an impact investing opportunity on a scale attractive to institutional investors.³¹

7. Make communities a first resort to take on assets on the high street³²

Alongside strategic coordination of policy, support and resources for community ownership by central government, councils must also create the conditions for community businesses to take a role in the ownership and governance of the high street. All local authorities should adopt a comprehensive Community Asset Transfer strategy with a clear approach to the management of



publicly owned assets. This should position communities as a first, not last, resort for the disposal of public assets – particularly those designated as Assets of Community Value – to safeguard their function as social infrastructure against privatisation or disuse. Councils should prioritise community management and ownership of publicly owned assets on the high street or in the town centre (as in the case of Dewsbury Arcade) to deliver broad community benefit through the regeneration of these spaces.



Conclusion

The decline of the department store has left a hole in the fabric of our high streets. Community businesses can help to repair it.

Community reuse of department stores is producing physical, economic and social benefits for our high streets and local communities. Community businesses are tackling vacancy and helping to repair and maintain the buildings they occupy. They are helping to diversify the offer of the high street, bringing new audiences to the town centre, increasing footfall to other local businesses and encouraging people to stay for longer. Community businesses are also reviving the social function of the department store by providing a place for people to meet and socialise, through spaces like community cafes and a range of no or low-cost activities, tailored to the needs of local people.

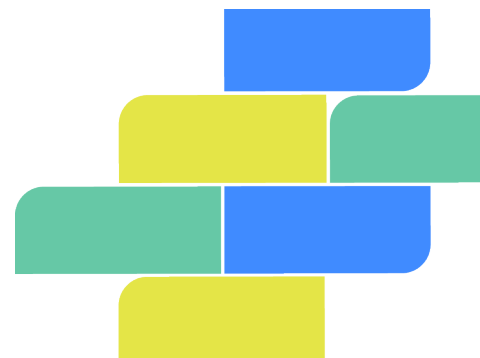
Community management and long-term stewardship is emerging as one of a range of possibilities for the future use of former department stores and town-centre retail spaces, which will see them combine their retail-focused past with new experiences, services and opportunities. A more mixed-use and experience-led design for these spaces will restore them as vital civic hubs.

The stories of community-led reuse in this report are fantastic examples of what is possible. But without action to capitalise on and enable these possibilities to be replicated in every corner of the country, they are likely to remain as bright spots in the dark. Community businesses need to be brought into partnerships with councils, asset owners and other high street stakeholders to make their visions for their place come true. And they need the backing of government through enabling policy, resources and support that make community-led regeneration and community ownership on the high street possible. With this, they can keep these national institutions at the heart of our communities for years to come.



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- ¹² Power to Change and CFE Research, *Community Business Market Report 2024* (forthcoming).
- ¹³ Interview with the founders.
- ¹⁴ Power to Change and CFE Research, *Community Business Market Report 2024* (forthcoming).
- ¹⁵ For more information about Public Living Rooms, see Camerados, <https://camerados.org/public-living-room/>; Hastings Commons, 'The Common Room', <https://hastingscommons.com/spaces/common-room/>.
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Backing
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We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them.

We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.

